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NOVEMBER

Weird Tales

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"THE PERFECT HOST"

by

Theodore Sturgeon

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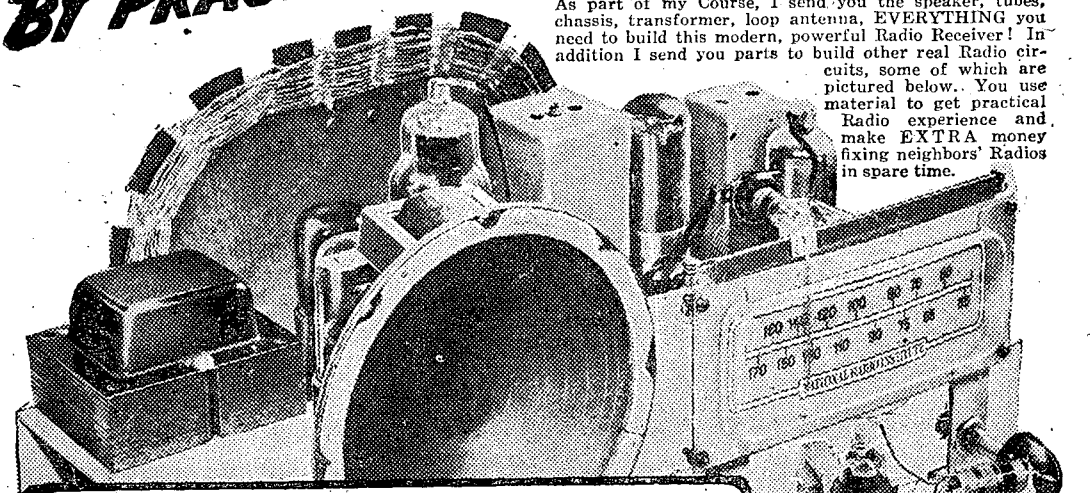

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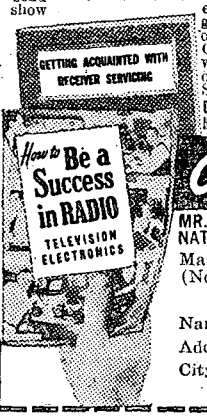

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Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

NOVEMBER, 1948 Cover by John Giunta

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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D. McILWRAITH, *Editor* LAMONT BUCHANAN, *Associate Editor*

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The Perfect Host

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BY THEODORE STURGEON

I

Ronnie Daniels

I WAS fourteen then. I was sitting in the car waiting for Dad to come out of the hospital. Dad was in there seeing Mother. It was the day after Dad told me I had a little sister.

It was July, warm, and I suppose about four in the afternoon. It was almost time for Dad to come out. I half opened the car door and looked for him.

Someone called, "Mister! Mister!"

There was a red squirrel arcing across the thick green lawn, and a man with balloons far down the block. I looked at them. Nobody would call me Mister. Nobody ever had, yet. I was too young.

"Mister!"

It was a woman's voice, but rough; rough and nasty. It was strong, and horrible for the pleading in it. No strong thing should beg. The sun was warm and the red of the brick buildings was warm, too. The squirrel was not afraid. The grass was as green and smooth as a jellybean; Mother was all right, Dad said; and Dad felt fine. We would go to the movies, Dad and I, close together with a closeness that never happened when things were regular, meals at home, Mother up making breakfast every morning, and all that. This week it would be raids on the ice box and staying up late sometimes, because Dad forgot about bedtime and anyway wanted to talk.

"Mister!"

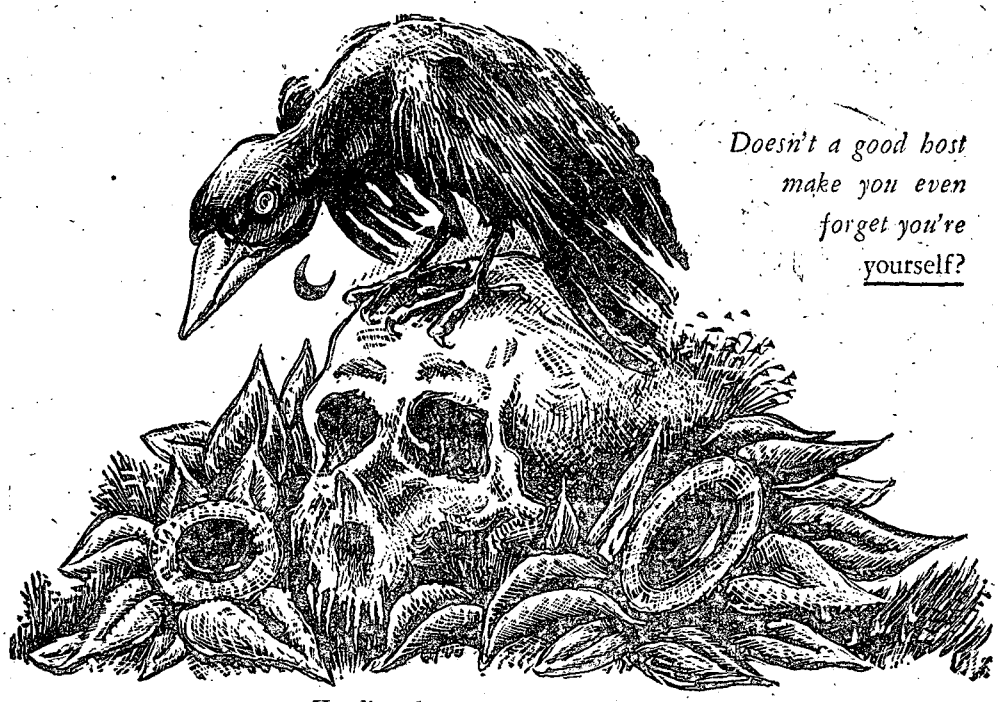
Her voice was like a dirty mark on a new collar. I looked up.

She was hanging out of a window on the second floor of a near ell of the hospital. Her hair was dank and stringy, her eyes had mud in them, and her teeth were beautiful. She was naked, at least to the waist. She was saying "Mister!" and she was saying it to me.

I was afraid, then. I got in the car and slammed the door.

"Mister! Mister! Mister!"

They were syllables that meant nothing. A "mis," a "ter"—sounds that rasped across the very wound they opened. I put my hands over my ears, but by then the sounds were inside my head, and my hands just



Doesn't a good host make you even forget you're yourself?

Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

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seemed to keep them there. I think I sobbed. I jumped out of the car and screamed, "What? What?"

"I got to get out of here," she moaned.

I thought, why tell me? I thought, what can I do? I had heard of crazy people, but I had never seen one. Grown-up people were sensible, mostly. It was only kids who did crazy things, without caring how much sense they made. I was only fourteen.

"Mister," she said. "Go to—to. . . . Let me think, now. . . . Where I live. Where I live."

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"In Homeland," she said. She sank down with her forehead on the sill, slowly, as if some big slow weight were on her shoulder-blades. I could see only the top of her head, the two dank feathers of her hair, and the point of an elbow. Homeland was a new residential suburb.

"Where in Homeland?" It seemed to be important. To me, I mean, as much as to her.

"Twenty," she mumbled. "I have to remember it . . ." and her voice trailed off. Suddenly she stood bolt upright, looking back into the room as if something had happened there. Then she leaned far out. "Twenty sixty five," she snarled. "You hear? Twenty sixty five. That's the one."

"Ron! Ronnie!"

It was Dad, coming down the path, looking at me, looking at the woman.

"That's the one," said the woman again. There was a flurry of white behind her. She put one foot on the sill and sprang out at me. I closed my eyes. I heard her hit the pavement. When I opened my eyes they were still looking up at the window. There was a starched white nurse up there with her fingers in her mouth, all of them, and eyes as round and blank as a trout's. I looked down. I felt Dad's hand on my upper arm. "Ronnie!"

I looked down. There was blood, just a little, on the cuff of my trousers. There was nothing else.

"Dad. . . ."

Dad looked all around, on the ground. He looked up at the window and at the nurse. The nurse looked at Dad and at me, and then put her hands on the sill and leaned out and looked all around on the ground. I could see, in the sunlight, where her fingers were wet from being in her mouth. Dad looked at me and again at the nurse, and I heard him draw a deep quivering breath as if he'd forgotten to breathe for a while and had only just realized it. The nurse straightened up, put her hands over her eyes and twisted back into the room.

Dad and I looked at each other. He said, "Ronnie—what was—what . . ." and then licked his lips. I was not as tall as my father, though he was not a tall man. He had thin, fine obedient hair, straight and starting high. He had blue eyes and a big nose and his mouth was quiet. He was broad and gentle and close to the ground, close to the earth. I said, "How's Mother?"

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Dad gestured at the ground where something should be, and looked at me. Then he said, "We'd better go, Ron."

I got into the car. He walked around it and got in and started it, and then sat holding the wheel, looking back at where we had been standing. There was still nothing there. The red squirrel, with one cheek puffed out, came bounding and freezing across the path. I asked again how Mother was.

"She's fine. Just fine. Be out soon. And the baby. Just fine." He looked back carefully for traffic, shifted and let in the clutch. "Good as new," he said.

I looked back again. The squirrel hopped and arched and stopped, sitting on something. It sat on something so that it was perhaps ten inches off the ground, but the thing it sat on couldn't be seen. The squirrel put up its paws and popped a chestnut into them from its cheek, and put its tail along its back with the big tip curled over like a fern-frond, and began to nibble. Then I couldn't see any more.

After a time Dad said, "What happened there just as I came up?"

I said, "What happened? Nothing. There was a squirrel."

"I mean, uh, up at the window."

"Oh. I saw a nurse up there."

"Yes, the nurse." He thought for a minute. "Anything else?"

"No. What are you going to call the baby?"

He looked at me strangely. I had to ask him again about the baby's name.

"I don't know yet," he said distantly. "Any ideas?"

"No, Dad."

We rode along for quite a while without saying anything. A little frown came and went between Dad's eyes, the way it did when he was figuring something out, whether it was a definition at charades, or an income tax report, or a problem of my school algebra.

"Dad. You know Homeland pretty well, don't you?"

"I should. Our oufit agented most of those sites. Why?"

"Is there a Homeland Street, or a Homeland Avenue out there?"

"Not a one. The north and south ones are streets, and are named after trees. The east and west ones are avenues, and are named after flowers. All alphabetical. Why?"

"I just wondered. Is there a number as high as 2065?"

"Not yet, though I hope there will be some day . . . unless it's a telephone number. Why, Ron? Where did you get that number?"

"I dunno. Just thought of it. Just wondered. Where are we going to eat?"

We went to the Bluebird.

I suppose I knew then what had gotten into me when the woman jumped; but I didn't think of it, any more than a redhead goes around thinking to himself "I have red hair" or a taxi-driver says to himself "I drive a cab." I knew, that's all. I just knew. I knew the *purpose,* too, but didn't think of it, any more than a man thinks and thinks of the place where he works, when he's on his way to work in the morning.

II

BENTON DANIELS

RONNIE'S not an unusual boy. Oh, maybe a little quieter than most, but it takes all kinds. . . . He's good in school, but not brilliant; averages in the low eighties, good in music and English and history, weak in math, worse in science than he could be if he cared a little bit more about it.

That day when we left the hospital grounds, though, there was something unusual going on. Yes, sir. I couldn't make head nor tail of it, and I must say I still can't. Sometimes I think it's Ronnie, and sometimes I think it was something temporarily wrong with me. I'm trying to get it all straight in my mind, right from the start.

I had just seen Clee and the baby. Clee looked a little tired, but her color was wonderful. The baby looked like a baby—that is, like a little pink old man, but I told Clee she was beautiful and takes after her mother, which she will be and do, of course, when she gets some meat on her bones.

I came along the side path from the main entrance, toward where the car was parked. Ronnie was waiting for me there. I saw him as I turned toward the road, just by the

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north building. Ronnie was standing by the car, with one foot on the running board, and he seemed to be talking with somebody in the second-floor window. I called out to him, but he didn't hear. Or he paid no attention. I looked up, and saw someone in the window. It was a woman, with a crazy face. I remember an impression of very regular, white teeth, and scraggly hair. I don't think she had any clothes on. I was shocked, and then I was very angry. I thought, here's some poor sick person gone out of her mind, and she'll maybe mark Ronnie for life, standing up there like that and maybe saying all sorts of things.

I ran to the boy, and just as I reached him, the woman jumped. I think someone came into the room behind her.

Now, look. I distinctly heard that woman's body hit. It was a terrible sound. And I remember feeling a wave of nausea just then, but for some reason I was sure then, and I'm sure now, that it had nothing to do with the thing I saw. That kind of shock-nausea only hits a person after the shock, not before or during. I don't even know why I think of this at all. It's just something I feel sure about, that's all.

I heard her body hit. I don't know whether I followed her body down with my eyes or not. There wasn't much time for that; she didn't fall more than twenty-five, maybe twenty-eight feet. I heard the noise, and when I looked down—*there wasn't anything there!*

I don't know what I thought then. I don't know if a man does actually *think* at a time like that. I know I looked all around, looking for a hole in the ground or maybe a sheet of camouflage or something which might be covering the body. It was too hard to accept that disappearance. They say that a dog doesn't bother with his reflection in a mirror because he can't smell it, and he believes his nose rather than his eyes. Humans aren't like that, I guess. When your brain tells you one thing and your eyes another, you just don't know what to believe. I looked back up at the window, perhaps thinking I'd been mistaken, that the woman would still be up there. She was gone, all right. There was a nurse up there instead, looking down, terrified.

I turned to Ronnie and started to ask him what had happened. I stopped when I saw his face. It wasn't shocked, or surprised, or anything. Just relaxed. He asked me how his mother was.

I said she was fine. I looked at his face and marveled that it showed nothing of this horrible thing that had happened. It wasn't blank, mind you. It was just as if nothing had occurred at all, or as if the thing had been wiped clean out of his memory. I thought at the moment that that was a blessing, and, with one more glance at the window—the nurse had gone—I went to the car and got in. Ronnie sat next to me. I started the car, then looked back at the path. There was nothing there.

I suppose the reaction hit me then—that, or the thought that I had had a hallucination. If I had, I was naturally worried. If I had not, what had happened to Ronnie?

I DROVE off, finally. Ronnie made some casual small talk. I questioned him about the thing, carefully, but he seemed honestly to know nothing about it. I decided to let well enough alone, at least for the time being. . . .

We had a quick dinner at the Bluebird, and then went home. I suppose I was poor company for the boy, because I kept finding myself mulling over the thing. We went to the Criterion, and I don't believe I heard or saw a bit of it. Then we picked up an evening paper and went home. He went to bed while I sat up with the headlines.

I found it down at the bottom of the third page. This is the item:

WOMAN DIES IN HOSPITAL LEAP

Mrs. Helmuth Stoye, of Homeland, was found yesterday afternoon under her window at Memorial Hospital, Carstairs. Dr. R. B. Knapp, head physician at the hospital, made a statement to the press in which he absolved the hospital and staff from any charges of negligence. A nurse, whose name is withheld, had just entered Mrs. Stoye's room when the woman leaped to her death. "There was no way to stop her," said Dr. Knapp. "It happened too fast."

Dr. Knapp said that Mrs. Stoye had shown no signs of depression or sui-

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cidal intent on admission to the hospital four days ago. Her specific illness was not divulged.

Mrs. Stoye, the former Grace Korshak of Ferntree, is survived by her husband, a well known printer here.

I went straight to the telephone and dialed the hospital. I heard the ringing signal once, twice, and then, before the hospital could answer, I hung up again. What could I ask them, or tell them? "I saw Mrs. Stoye jump." They'd be interested in that, all right. Then what? "She disappeared when she hit the ground." I can imagine what they'd say to that. "But my son saw it too!" And then questions from hospital officials, a psychiatrist or two. . . . Ronnie being questioned, after he had mercifully forgotten about the whole thing . . . no. No; better let well enough alone.

The newspaper said Mrs. Stoye was found under her window. Whoever found her must have been able to see her.

I wonder what the nurse saw?

I went into the kitchen and heated some coffee, poured it, sweetened it, stirred it, and then left it untasted on the table while I put on my hat and got my car keys.

I had to see that nurse. First I tore out the newspaper article—I didn't want Ronnie ever to see it—and then I left the house.

III

Lucille Holder

I HAVE seen a lot of ugly things as a trainee and as a nurse, but they don't bother me very much. It isn't that the familiarity hardens one; it is rather that one learns the knack of channeling one's emotions around the ugly thing.

When I was a child in England I learned how to use this knack. I lived in Coventry, and though Herr Hitler's treatment of the city seems to have faded from the news and from fiction, the story is still vividly written on the memories of us who were there, and is read and reread more often than we care to say.

You can't know what this means until you know the grim happiness that the chap you've dug out of the ruins is a dead 'un, for the ones who still live horrify you so.

So—one gets accustomed to the worst. Further, one is prepared when a worse "worst" presents itself. And I suppose that it was this very preparation which found me jolly well unprepared for what happened when Mrs. Stoye jumped out of her window.

There were two things happening from the instant I opened her door. One thing was what I did, and the other thing is what I felt.

These are the things I did:

I stepped into the room, carrying a washing tray on my arm. Everything seemed in order, except, of course, that Mrs. Stoye was out of bed. That didn't surprise me; she was ambulant. She was over by the window; I suppose I glanced around the room before I looked directly at her. When I saw her pajama-top lying on the bed-clothes I looked at her, though. She straightened up suddenly as she heard me, barked something about "That's the one!" and jumped—dived, rather— right out. It wasn't too much of a drop, really—less than thirty feet, I'd say, but she went down head first, and I knew instantly that she hadn't a chance.

I can't remember setting down the washing tray; I saw it later on the bed. I must have spun around and set it there and rushed to the window. I looked down, quite prepared for the worst, as I've said.

But what I saw was so terribly much worse than it should have been. I mean, an ill person is a bad thing to see, and an accident case can be worse, and burn cases, I think, are worst of all. The thing is, these all get worse in one direction. One simply cannot be prepared for something which is bad in a totally unexpected, impossible way.

There was nothing down there at all. Nothing. I saw Mrs. Stoye jump out, ran to the window, it couldn't have been more than three seconds later; and there was nothing there.

But I'm saying now how I felt. I mean to say first what I did, because the two are so different, from this point on.

I looked down; there was no underbrush, no flowerbed, nothing which could have concealed her had she rolled. There were some people—a stocky man and a young

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boy, perhaps fourteen or fifteen—standing nearby. The man seemed to be searching the ground as I was; I don't remember what the boy was doing. Just standing there. The man looked up at me; he looked badly frightened. He spoke to the boy, who answered quietly, and then they moved off together to the road. I looked down once more, still could not see Mrs. Stoye, and turned and ran to the signal-button. I rang it and then rushed out into the hall. I must have looked very distraught. I ran right into Dr. Knapp, all but knocking him over, and gasped out that Mrs. Stoye had jumped.

Dr. Knapp was terribly decent. He led me back into the room and told me to sit down. Then he went to the window, looked down and grunted. Miss Flaggon came in just then. I was crying. Dr. Knapp told her to get a stretcher and a couple of orderlies and take them outside, under this window. She asked no questions, but fled; when Dr. Knapp gives orders in that voice, people jump to it. Dr. Knapp ran out, calling to me to stay where I was until he came back. In spite of the excitement, he actually managed to make his voice gentle.

I went to the window after a moment and looked down. Two medical students were running across the lawn from the south building, and the orderlies with their stretcher, still rolled, were pelting down the path. Dr. Knapp, bag in hand, was close behind them. Dr. Carstairs and Dr. Greenberg were under the window and already shunting away the few curious visitors who had appeared as if from out of the ground, the way people do after an accident anywhere. But most important of all, I saw Mrs. Stoye's body. It was lying crumpled up, directly below me, and there was no doubt of it that her neck was broken and her skull badly fractured. I went and sat down again.

AFTERWARD Dr. Knapp questioned me closely and, I must say, very kindly. I told him nothing about the strange disappearance of the body. I expect he thought I was crying because I felt responsible for the death. He assured me that my record was in my favor, and it was perfectly understandable that I was helpless to stop Mrs. Stoye. I apparently went quite to pieces then, and Dr. Knapp suggested that I take my two weeks' leave—it was due in another twenty days in any case—immediately, and rest up and forget this thing.

"Go out with the glamor boy every night while you're off," he suggested, grinning. "You'll be okay."

I thought of Mervin and what it would be like to have him saying those sweet things about how tiny I was—he used to call me Midge and Shorty and things like that, the idiot—every evening for two weeks, and how nice it would be to feel small and incompetent and—well, protected for a change. I said "Perhaps I will."

I went out to the Quarters to bathe and change. And now I had better say how I *felt* during all this. . . .

I was terrified when Mrs. Stoye jumped. When I reached the window right afterward, I was exactly as excited as one might expect.

But the instant I looked down, something happened. It wasn't anything I can describe, except to say that there was a change of attitude. That doesn't seem to mean much, does it? Well, I can only say this; that from that moment I was no longer frightened nor shocked nor horrified nor anything else. I remember putting my hands up to my mouth, and I must have given a perfect picture of a terrified nurse. I was actually quite calm. I was quite cool as I ran to the bell and then out into the hall. I collapsed, I cried, I sobbed. I produced a flood of tears and streaks for my face. But during every minute of it I was completely calm.

Now, I knew that was strange, but I felt no surprise at it. I knew that it could be called dishonest. I don't know how to analyze it. I am a nurse, and a profound sense of duty has been drilled into me for years. I felt that it was my duty to cry, to say nothing about the disappearance of the body, to get the two weeks leave immediately, and to do the other things which I have done and must do.

While I bathed I thought. I was still calm, and I suppose I behaved calmly; it didn't matter, for there was no one to see.

Two people had seen Mrs. Stoye jump besides myself. I realized that I must see them. I didn't think about the disappearing body. I didn't feel I had to, somehow, any more than one thinks consciously of the

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water in the pipes and heaters as one draws a bath. The thing was there, and needed no investigation. But it was necessary to see that man and the boy. What I must do when I saw them required no thought either. That seemed all arranged, unquestionable, so evident that it needed no thought or definition.

I put away the white stockings and shoes with a feeling or relief, and slipped into underthings with a bit of lace on them, and sheer hose. I put on my wine rayon with the gored skirt, and the matching shoes. I combed my hair out and put it up in a roll around the back, cool and out of the way. Money, keys, cigarette case, knife, lighter, compact. All ready.

I went round by the administration offices, thinking hard. A man visits the hospital with his boy—it was probably his boy—and leaves the boy outside while he goes in. He would be seeing a wife, in all probability. He'd leave the boy outside only if the woman's condition were serious or if she were immediately post-operative or post-partem. So many patients go in and out that I naturally don't remember many of them; on the other hand, I can almost always tell a new patient or visitor . . . marvelous the way the mind, unbidden, clocks and catalogs, to some degree, all that passes before it. . . .

So the chances were that these people, the man and the boy, were visiting a new patient. Maternity would be as good a guess as any, to start with.

It was well after nine o'clock, the evening of Mrs. Stoye's death, and the administration offices were deserted except for Miss Kaye, the night registrar. It was not unusual for nurses to check up occasionally on patients. I nodded to Miss Kaye and went back to the files. The Maternity Admission file gave me five names for the previous two days. I got the five cards out of the Patients Alphabetical and glanced over them. Two of these new mothers had other children; a Mrs. Korff, with three sons and a daughter at home, and a Mrs. Daniels, who had one son. Here: "Previous children: One. Age this date: 14 yrs. 3 months." And further down: "Father's age: 41."

It looked like a bull's eye. I remember feeling inordinately pleased with myself, as if I had assisted particularly well in an operation, or had done a bang-up job of critical first-aid. I copied down the address of the Daniels family, and, carefully replacing all the cards, made my vacation check-out and left the building.

It seemed late to go calling, but I knew that I must. There had been a telephone number on the card, but I had ignored it. What I must do could not be done over the phone.

I found the place fairly easily, although it was a long way out in the suburbs on the other side of the town. It was a small, comfortable-looking place, set well back from the road, and with wide lawns and its own garage. I stepped up on the porch and quite shamelessly looked inside.

The outer door opened directly into the living room, without a foyer. There was a plate-glass panel in the door with a sheer curtain on the inside. I could see quite clearly. The room was not too large—fireplace, wainscoting, stairway in the left corner, big easy-chairs, a studio-couch—that sort of thing. There was a torn newspaper tossed on the arm of one fireside chair. Two end-table lamps were lit. There was no one in the room.

I RANG the bell, waited, rang again, peering in. Soon I saw a movement on the stairs. It was the boy, thin-looking and touseled, thumping down the carpeted steps, tying the cord of a dark-red dressing gown as he came. On the landing he stopped. I could just hear him call "Dad!". He leaned over the banister, looking up and back. He called again, shrugged a shrug which turned into a stretch, and, yawning, came to the door. I hid the knife in my sleeve.

"Oh!" he said, startled, as he opened the door. Unaccountably, I felt a wave of nausea. Getting a grip on myself, I stepped inside before I spoke. He stood looking at me, flushing a bit, conscious, I think, of his bare feet, for he stood on one of them, trying to curl the toes of the other one out of sight.

"Daniels. . . ." I murmured.

"Yes," he said. "I'm Ronald Daniels." He glanced quickly back into the room. "Dad doesn't seem to be . . . I don't . . . I was asleep."

"I'm so sorry."

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"Gosh, that's all right," he said. He was a sweet little chap, not a man yet, not a child—less and less of a child as he woke up, which he was doing slowly. He smiled. "Come in. Let me have your coat. Dad ought to be here now. Maybe he went for cigarettes or something." It was as if a switch had been thrown and a little sign had lit up within him— "Remember your manners."

Abruptly I felt the strangest compulsion—a yearning, a warming toward this lad. It was completely a sexual thing, mind you—completely. But it was as if a part of me belonged to a part of him . . . no; more the other way round. I don't know. It can't be described. And with the feeling, I suddenly knew that it was all right, it was all quite all right. I did not have to see Mr. Daniels after all. That business would be well-taken care of when the time came, and not by me. Better—much better—for him to do it.

He extended his hand for my coat. "Thank you *so* much," I said, smiling, liking him—more than liking him, in this indefinable way—"but I really must go. I—if your father—" How could I say it? How could I let him know that it was different now; that everything might be spoiled if his father knew I had come here? "I mean, when your father comes back. . . ."

Startlingly, he laughed. "Please don't worry," he said. "I won't tell him you were here."

I looked at his face, his round, bland face, so odd with his short slender frame. That thing like a sense of duty told me not to ask, but I violated it. "You don't know who I am, do you?"

He shook his head. "Not really. But it doesn't matter. I won't tell Dad."

"Good," I smiled, and left.

IV

Jennie Beaufort

YOU never know what you're going to run up against when you're an information operator, I mean really, people seem to have the craziest idea of what we're there for. Like the man called up the other day and wanted to know how you spell conscientious—"Just conscientious," he says, "I know how to spell objector" and I gave him the singsong, you know, the voice with a smile, "I'm soeee! We haven't that infor-*may*—shun!" and keyed him out, thinking to myself, what a shmoe. (I told Mr. Parker, he's my super, and he grinned and said it was a sign of the times; Mr. Parker's always making jokes.) And like the other man wants to know if he gets a busy signal and hangs on to the line, will the signal stop and the bell ring when the party he is calling hangs up. I want to say to him, who do you think I am, Alexander Graham Bell or something, maybe Don Ameche, instead of which I tell him "One moment, sir, and I will get that information for you?" (not that I'm asking a question, you raise your voice that way because it leaves the customer breathless) and I nudge Sue and she tells me, Sue knows everything.

Not that everything like that comes over the wire, anything is liable to happen right there in the office or in the halls to say nothing of the stage-door johnnies with hair-oil and cellophane boxes who ask all the girls if they are Operator 23, she has such a nice voice.

Like the kid that was in here yesterday, not that he was on the prowl, he was too young, though five years from now he'll be just dreamy, with his cute round face and his long legs. Mr. Parker brought him in to me and told me the kid was getting up a talk on telephones for his civics class in high school, and tells the kid to just ask Miss Beaufort anything he wants to know, and walks off rubbing his hands, which I can understand because he has made me feel good and made the kid feel good and has me doing all the work while he gets all the credit. Not that I felt good just at that particular moment, my stomach did a small flip-flop but that has nothing to do with it, it must have been the marshmallow whip I had with my lunch, I should remember to keep away from marshmallow when I have gravy-and-mashed, at least on weekdays.

Anyway this kid was cute, with his pleases and his thank you's and his little almost-bows-from-the-waist like a regular Lord Calvert. He asked me all sorts of questions and all smart too, but he never asked them right out, I mean, he would say,

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"Please tell me how you can find a number so *fast?*" and then listen to every word I said and squiggle something down in his notebook. I showed him the alphabeticals and the central indexes and the assonance file (and you can bet I called it by its full name to that nice youngster) where we find out that a number for Meyer, say, is listed as Maior. And he wanted to know why it was that we never give a street address to someone who has the phone number, but only the other way around, and how we found out the phone number from just the street address. So I showed him the street index and the checking index, which has the numbers all in order by exchanges with the street addresses, which is what we use to trace calls when we have to. And lots more. And finally he said he wanted to pretend he was me for a minute, to see if he understood everything. He even blushed when he said it. I told him to go ahead and got up and let him sit down. He sat there all serious and bright-eyed, and said, "Now, suppose I am you, and someone wants to know the number of—uh—Fred Zimmerman, who lives out at Bell Hill, but they have no street number." And I showed him how to flip out the alphabetical, and how to ask the customer which one he wants if there should be more than one Fred Zimmerman. He listened so carefully and politely, and made a note in his book. Then he asked me what happens if the police or somebody has a phone number and wants the address, we'll say, out in Homeland, like Homeland 2050. I showed him the numerical index, and he whipped it out and opened it like an old hand. My, he caught on quickly. He made another note in his book . . . well, it went on like that, and inside of twenty minutes I bet he could take over from me any time and not give Mr. Parker a minute's worry, which is more than I can say for some of the girls who have been working here for years, like that Patty Mawson with her blonde hair and her awful New Look.

Well, that boy picked my brains dry in short order, and he got up and for a moment I thought he was going to kiss my hand like a Frenchman or a European, but he didn't, he just thanked me as if I had given him the crown jewels or my hand in marriage, and went out to do the same for Mr. Parker, and all I can say is, I wish one-tenth of the customers showed as much good housebreaking.

I'll tell you one thing though. One of these days I'm going to win a radio quiz or have an uncle die—not Uncle Fred or Uncle Tom, but some uncle I never heard of—and get a million dollars or so, and I'm going to go out and buy a whole truckload of big heavy clocks. Then I will work one more week and trace the call of every bubblehead who calls "information" and asks what time it is, instead of dialling the time number. Then I will quit my job and take my truck and go to every one of those houses and heave a clock through whatever window to the front parlor they've left closed.

Maybe I'll need two trucks.

V

Helmuth Stoye

GRACE . . . Grace . . . *Grace!*

Oh, my darling, my gentle, my soft little bird with the husky voice. Miss Funny-Brows. Little Miss Teeth. You used to laugh such a special laugh when I made up new names for you, Coral-cache, Cadenza, Viola-voice . . . and you'll never laugh again, because I killed you.

I killed you, I killed you.

Yesterday I stopped all the clocks.

I couldn't stand it. It was wrong; it was a violation. You were dead. I drew the blinds and sat in the dark, not really believing that it had happened—how *could* it happen? You're *Grace,* you're the humming in the kitchen, the quick footfalls in the foyer as I come up the porch steps. I think for a while I believed that your coming back was the most real, the most obvious thing; in a moment, any moment, you would come in and kiss the nape of my neck; you would be smelling of vanilla and cut flowers, and you'd laugh at me and together we'd fling up the blinds and let in the light. And then Tinkle struck—Tinkle, the eight-foot grandfather's clock with the *basso profundo* chime. That was when I knew what was real. It was real that you were dead, it was real. . . .

I got angry at that violation, that sacri-

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lege, that clock. What right had the clock to strike, the hands to move? How could it go on? It was wrong. I got up and stopped it. I think I spoke to it, not harshly, angry as I was; I said, "You don't know, do you, Tinkle? No one's told you yet," and I caught it by its swinging neck and held it until its ticking brain was quiet. I told all the clocks, one by one, that you were dead—the glowing Seth Thomas ship's clock, with its heavy threads and its paired syllables, and Drowsy the alarm, and the cuckoo with the cleft palate who couldn't say anything but "hook-who!"

A truck roared by outside, and I remember the new surge of fury because of it, and then the thought that the driver hadn't been told yet . . . and then the mad thought that the news would spread from these silent clocks, from these drawn blinds, spread like a cloud-shadow over the world, and when it touched birds, they would glide to the ground and crouch motionless, with no movement in their jewelled eyes; when it touched machines, they would slow and stop; when it touched flowers they would close themselves into little soft fists and bend to knuckle the earth; when it touched people they would finish that stride, end that sentence, slowing, softening, and would sink down and be still. There would be no noise or confusion as the world slipped into its stasis, and nothing would grow but silence. And the sun would hang on the horizon with its face thickly veiled, and there would be eternal dusk. These things would not happen as a tribute to you; nothing would grieve, for grief, God help me, is too alive a thing. . . .

That was yesterday, and I was angry. I am not angry today. It was better, yesterday, the sitting in turmoil and uselessness, the useless raging up and down rooms so hollow, yet still so full of you they would not echo. It got dark, you see, and in good time the blinds were brighter than the walls around them again. I looked out, squinting through grainy eyelids, and saw a man walking by, walking easily, his hands in his pockets, and he was whistling. After that I could not be angry any more, not at the man, not at the morning. I knew only the great cruel pressure of a fact, a fact worse than the fact of emptiness or of death—the fact that nothing ever stops, that things must go on.

It was better to be angry, and to lose myself in uselessness. Now I am not angry and I have no choice but to think usefully. I have lived a useful life and have built it all on useful thinking, and if I had not thought so much and so carefully Grace would be here with me now, with her voice like a large soft breeze in some springtime place, and perhaps tickling the side of my neck with feather-touches of her moving lips . . . it was my useful, questing, thirsty thought which killed her, killed her.

The accident was all of two years ago—almost two years, anyway. We had driven all the way back from Springfield without stopping, and we were very tired. Grace and Mr. Share and I were squeezed into the front seat. Mr. Share was a man Grace had invented long before, even before we were married. He was a big invisible fat man who always sat by the right-hand window, and always looked out to the side so that he never watched us. But since he was so fat, Grace had to press up close to me as we drove.

THERE was a stake-bodied truck bowling along ahead of us, and in the back of it was a spry old man, or perhaps a weather-beaten young man—you couldn't tell—in blue dungarees and a red shirt. He had a yellow woolen muffler tied around his waist, and the simple strip of material made all the difference between "clothes" and "costume."

Behind him, lashed to the bed of the truck just back of the cab, was a large bundle of burlap. It would have made an adequate seat for him, cushioned and out of the wind. But the man seemed to take the wind as a heady beverage and the leaping floor as a challenge. He stood with his arms away from his sides and his knees slightly flexed, and rode the truck as if it were a live thing. He yielded himself to each lurch and bump, brought himself back with each recession, guarding his equilibrium with an easy virtuosity.

Grace was, I think, dozing; my shout of delighted laughter at the performance on the bounding stage before us brought her upright. She laughed with me for the laugh

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alone, for she had not looked through the windshield yet, and she kissed my cheek.

He saw her do it, the man on the truck, and he laughed with us. "He's *our* kind of people," Grace said. "A pixie," I agreed, and we laughed again.

The man took off an imaginary plumed hat, swung it low toward us, but very obviously toward Grace. She nodded back to him, with a slight sidewise turn of her face as it went down that symbolized a deep curtsey.

Then he held out his elbow, and the pose, the slightly raised shoulder over which he looked fondly at the air over his bent arm, showed that he had given his arm to a lady. The lady was Grace, who, of course, would be charmed to join him in the dance . . . she clapped her hands and crowed with delight, as she watched her imaginary self with the courtly, colorful figure ahead.

The man stepped with dainty dignity to the middle of the truck and bowed again, and you could all but hear the muted minuet as it began. It was a truly wonderful thing to watch, this pantomine; the man knew the ancient, stately steps to perfection, and they were unflawed by the careening surface on which they were performed. There was no mockery in the miming, but simply the fullness of good, the sheer, unspoiled sharing of a happy magic. He bowed, he took her hand, smiled back into her eyes as she pirouetted behind him. He stood back to the line waiting his turn, nodding slightly to the music; he dipped ever so little, twice, as his turn came, and stepped gracefully out to meet her, smiling again.

I don't know what made me look up. We were nearing the Speedway Viaduct, and the truck ahead was just about to pass under it. High up over our heads was the great span, and as my eye followed its curve, to see the late afternoon sun on the square guard-posts which bounded the elevated road, three of the posts exploded outward, and the blunt nose of a heavy truck plowed through and over the edge, to slip and catch and slip again, finally to teeter to a precarious stop. Apparently its trailer was loaded with light steel girders; one of them slipped over the tractor's crumpled shoulder and speared down toward us.

Our companion of the minuet, on the truck ahead, had finished his dance, and, turned to us, was bowing low, smiling, looking up through his eyebrows at us. The girder's end took him on the back of the head. It did not take the head off; it obliterated it. The body struck flat and lay still, as still as wet paper stuck to glass. The girder bit a large piece out of the tailgate and somersaulted to the right, while I braked and swerved dangerously away from it. Fortunately there were no cars coming toward us.

There was, of course, a long, mixed-up, horrified sequence of the two truckdrivers, the one ahead and the one who came down later from the viaduct and was sick. Ambulances and bystanders and a lot of talk . . . none of it matters, really. No one ever found out who the dead man was. He had no luggage and no identification; he had been hitchhiking, and he had over ninety dollars in his pocket. He might have been anybody—someone from show business, or a writer perhaps, on a haywire vacation of his own wild devising. I suppose that doesn't matter either. What does matter is that he died while Grace was in a very close communion with what he was doing, and her mind was wide open for his fantasy. Mine is, generally, I suppose; but at that particular moment, when I had seen the smash above and the descending girder, I was wide awake, on guard. I think that had a lot to do with what has happened since. I think it has everything to do with Grace's—with Grace's—

There is no word for it. I can say this, though. Grace and I were never alone together again until the day she died. Died, died, Grace is dead.

Grace!

I CAN GO on with my accursed useful thinking now, I suppose.

Grace was, of course, badly shaken, and I did what I could for her over the next few weeks. I tried my best to understand how it was affecting her. (That's what I mean by useful thinking—trying to understand. Trying and trying—prying and prying. Arranging, probing, finding out. Getting a glimpse, a scent of danger, rooting it out—bringing it out into the open where it can get at you.) Rest and new clothes and alcohol rubdowns; the theater, music and music, always music, for she could lose her-

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self in it, riding its flux, feeling and folding herself in it, following it, sometimes, with her hushed, true voice, sometimes lying open to it, letting it play its colors and touches over her.

There is always an end to patience, however. After two months, knowing her as I did, I knew that there was more here than simple shock. If I had known her less well—if I had cared less, even, it couldn't have mattered.

It began with small things. There were abstractions which were unusual in so vibrant a person. In a quiet room, her face would listen to music; sometimes I had to speak twice and then repeat what I had said. Once I came home and found supper not started; the bed not made. Those things were not important—I am not a fusspot nor an autocrat; but I was shaken when, after calling her repeatedly I found her in the guest room, sitting on the bed without lights. I had no idea she was in there; I just walked in and snapped on the light in the beginnings of panic because she seemed not to be in the house; she had not answered me. And at first it was as if she had not noticed the sudden yellow blaze from the paired lamps; she was gazing at the wall, and on her face was an expression of perfect peace. She was wide awake—at least her eyes were. I called her: "Grace!"

"Hellion, darling," she said quietly. Her head turned casually toward me and she smiled—oh, those perfect teeth of hers!—and her smile was only partly for me; the rest of it was inside, with the nameless things with which she had been communing.

I sat beside her, amazed, and took her hands. I suppose I spluttered a bit, "Grace, are you all right? Why didn't you answer? The bed's not—have you been out? What's happened? Here—let me see if you have a fever."

Her eyes were awake, yes; but not awake to me, to here and now. They were awake and open to some *elsewhère* matters. . . . She acquiesced as I felt her forehead and cheeks for fever, and while I was doing it I could see the attention of those warm, pleased, living eyes shifting from the things they had been seeing, to me. It was as if they were watching a scene fade out while another was brought in on a screen, so that for a second all focussing points on the first picture were lost, and there was a search for a focussing point on the second. And then, apparently, the picture of Helmuth Stoye sitting next to her, holding one of her hands, running his right palm across her forehead and down her cheek, came into sharp, true value, and she said, "Darling! You're home! What happened? Holiday or strike? You're not sick?"

I said, "Sweetheart, it's after seven."

"No!" She rose, smoothed her hair in front of the mirror. Hers was a large face and her appeal had none of the doll-qualities, the candy-and-peaches qualities of the four-color ads. Her brow and cheekbones were wide and strong, and the hinges of her jaw were well-marked, hollowed underneath. Her nostrils were flared and sensuously tilted and her shoulders too wide to be suitable for fashion plates or pin-ups. But clothes hung from those shoulders with the graceful majesty of royal capes, and her breasts were large, high, separated and firm. Her torso was flat and strong, and strength was in the smooth turn of muscles in her arms and sturdy legs. Yet for all her width and flatness and strength, for all her powerfully-set features, she was woman all through; and with clothes or without, she looked it.

She said, "I had no idea . . . after seven! Oh, darling, I'm sorry. You poor thing, and no dinner yet. Come help me," and she dashed out of the room, leaving me flapping my lips, calling, "But Grace! Wait! Tell me first what's the mat—"

AND when I got to the kitchen she was whipping up a dinner, efficiently, deftly, and all my questions could wait, could be interrupted with "Hellion, honey, open these, will you?" "I don't know, b'loved; we'll dig it out after supper. Will you see if there're any French-fried in the freezer?"

And afterward she remembered that "The Pearl" was playing at the Ascot Theater, and we'd missed it when it first came to town, and this was the last night . . . we went, and the picture was fine, and we talked of nothing else that night.

I could have forgotten about that episode, I suppose. I could have forgotten about any one of them—the time she turned her gaze

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so strangely inward when she was whipping cream, and turned it to butter because she simply forgot to stop whipping it when it was ready; the times she had the strong, uncharacteristic urges to do and feel things which had never interested her before—to lose herself in distances from high buildings and tall hills, to swim under water for long, frightening minutes; to hear new and ever new kinds of music—saccharine foxtrots and atonal string quartets, arrangements for percussion alone and oriental modes. And foods—rattlesnake ribs, moo goo gai pan, curried salmon with green rice, *Paella,* with its chicken and clams, headcheese, *canolas,* sweet-and-pungent pork; all these Grace made herself, and well.

But in food as in music, in new sensualities as in new activities, there was no basic change in Grace. These were additions only; for all the exoticism of the dishes, for example, we still had and enjoyed the things she had always made—the gingered leg of lamb, the acorn-squash filled with creamed onions, the *crepes-suzettes.* She could still be lost in the architecture of Bach's "Passacaglia and Fugue" and in the raw heartbeat of the Haggard-Bauduc "Big Noise from Winnetka." Because she had this new passion for underwater swimming, she did not let it take from her enjoyment of highboard diving. Her occasional lapses from efficiency, as in the whipped-cream episode, were rare and temporary. Her sometime dreaminess, when she would forget appointments and arrangements and time itself, happened so seldom that, in all justice, they could have been forgotten, or put down, with all my vaunted understanding, to some obscure desire for privacy, for aloneness. (No human soul should be denied the privilege of solitude, for only in solitude can the mind resolve its intake with its wealth . . .)

So—she had everything she had always had, and now more. She was everything she always had been, and now more. She did everything she had always done, and now more. Then what, what on earth and in heaven, was I bothered, worried, and—and afraid of?

I know now. It was jealousy. It was—one of the jealousies.

There wasn't Another Man. That kind of poison springs from insecurity—from the knowledge that there's enough wrong with you that the chances are high that another man—any other man—could do a better job than you in some department of your woman's needs. Besides, that kind of thing can never be done by the Other Man alone; your woman must cooperate, wilfully and consciously, or it can't happen. And Grace was incapable of that. Should the fantastic situation arise, should she want to, she would have cut me off with one clean blow and gone to the other with all her heart. Suspicion of such a thing would be unjust, weak, and psycopathic, and I had none of it.

No; it was because of the sharing we had had. My marriage was a magic one because of what we shared; because of our ability to see a red-gold leaf, exchange a glance, and say never a word, for we knew so well each other's pleasure, its causes and expressions and associations. The pleasures were not the magic; the sharing was.

A POOR analogy: you have a roommate who is a very dear friend, and together you have completely redecorated your room. The colors, the lighting, the concealed shelves and drapes, all are a glad communion of your separated tastes. You are both proud and fond of your beautiful room . . . and one day you come home and find a new television set. Your roommate has acquired it and brought it in to surprise you. You are surprised, and you are happy, too, and you enjoy the new extra pleasures of this conqueror of space and time; but slowly an ugly thing creeps into your mind. The set is a big thing, an important, dominating thing in the room and in the things for which you use the room. And it is *his*—not mine or ours, but *his*. There is his unspoken, undemanded authority in the choice of programs in the evenings; and where are the chess-games, the folk-singing with your guitar, the long hours of phonograph music? They are there, of course, ready for you every moment; no one has taken them away. But now the room is different. It can continue to be a happy room; only a petty mind would resent the new shared riches; but the fact that the *source* of the riches is not shared, was not planned by you both, was not discussed or agreed upon even when there was no possibility for disagreement—

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this changes the room and everything in it, the colors, the people, the shape and warmth.

SO WITH my marriage. A thing had come to Grace which made us both richer . . . but I did not share that source; and damn, damn my selfishness, I could not bear it; if I could not share it I wanted her deprived of it.

And I poked and I prodded and pried, and now look . . . *Grace is dead!*

Petalfinger, Langue-douce, *Ol' Miss Structural Shoulders . . . Tease-tears, Mothermouth. . . . Once you said, "Hellion, darling, you know how I hold you?" and I said, "Show me," and you cupped your hands together, closed tight, and raised them to your face, and opened them swiftly to peer inside, to clap them shut again, to hug them tight to your breast while you laughed with delight at the pretend-thing you had seen so closely held within that soft strong chamber. . . . "Like that," you said, and I could have cried.*

So . . . there was a long period when I kept my questing to myself, which was a sin; poor possessed darling, she shared everything with me that she could, I know it now; it was I who did not share, but buttoned up my pointed studyings, my twisted, hunting, fretting jealousy within myself. What was it? What was it? Why was she different? Mine was a strange and devious melody against that reiterated choral phrase. . . .

I was gentle; beginning with "How do you feel, sweetheart? But you aren't all right; what were you thinking of? It couldn't be 'nothing' . . . you were giving more attention to it than you are to me right now!"

I was firm; beginning with, "Now look, darling; there's something here that we have to face. Please help. Now, exactly why are you so interested in hearing that Hindemith sketch? You never used to be interested in music like that. It has no melody, no key, no rhythm; it's unpredictable and ugly. I'm quoting you, darling; that's what you used to say about it. And now you want to soak yourself in it. Why? Why? What has changed you? Yes—people must grow and change; I know that. But—growing so fast, so quickly, in so many different directions! Tell me, now. Tell me exactly why you feel moved to hear this thing at this time."

And—I was angry, beginning with, "Grace! Why didn't you answer me? Oh, you heard me, did you? What did I say? Yes; that's right; you did . . . then why didn't you answer? Well? Not important? Not important to reply to a general remark like the one I made? You'll have to realize that it's important to me to be answered when I speak to you!"

She tried. I could see her trying. I wouldn't stop. I began to watch her every minute. I stopped waiting for openings, and made them myself. I trapped her. I put on music in which I knew she would be lost, and spoke softly, and when she did not answer, I would kick over my chair with a shout and demand that she speak up. She tried. . . . Sometimes she was indignant, and demanded the peace that should be her right. Once she got hysterical, and said I was going mad, and once I struck her.

That did it. Oh, the poor, brutalized beloved!

Now I can see it; *now!*

She never could answer me, until the one time. What could she have said? Her "I don't know!" was the truth. Her patience went too far, her anger not far enough, and I know that her hurt was without limits.

I struck her, and she answered my questions. I was even angrier after she had than I had been before, for I felt that she had known all along, that until now she had withheld what she knew; and I cursed myself for not using force earlier and more often. I did. For not hitting *Grace* before!

I came home that night tired, for there was trouble at the shop; I suppose I was irascible with the compositors, but that was only because I had not slept well the night before, which was because . . . anyway, when I got home, I slammed the door, which was not usual, and, standing there with my raincoat draped over one shoulder, looking at the beautiful spread on the coffee table in front of the fireplace, I demanded, "What's that for?" There were canapes and dainty round and rolled and triangular sandwiches; a frosty bluish beverage twinkling with effevescence in its slender pitcher; there were stars and flowers of tiny pickles, pastes and dressings, a lovely coral potato-chip, and covered dishes full of delicate mysteries. There were also two small and vivid bowls

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of cut blooms, beautifully arranged. She said, "Why, for us. Just for us two."

I said, "Good God. Is there anything the matter with sitting up to a table and eating like a human being?" Then I went to hang up the coat.

She had not moved when I came back; she was still standing facing the door, and perhaps a quarter of her welcoming smile was frozen on her face.

No, I said to myself, no you don't. Don't go soft, now. You have her on the run; let's break this thing up now, all at once, all over the place. The healing can come later. I said "Well?"

She turned to me, her eyes full of tears. "Helmuth . . ." she said weakly. I waited. "Why did you . . . it was only a surprise. A pretty surprise for you. We haven't been together for so long . . . you've been . . ."

"You haven't been yourself since that accident," I said coldly. "I think you know why, and you won't tell me. I think you like being different. Turn off the tears, honey. They'll do you no good."

"I'm *not* different!" she wailed; and then she began to cry in earnest. "I can't stand it!" she moaned, "I can't, I can't . . . Helmuth, you're losing your mind. I'm going to leave you. Leave you . . . maybe for just a while, maybe for . . ."

"You're going to *what?*" I whispered, going very close to her.

She made a supreme effort and answered, flatly, looking me in the eye, "I'm going, Helmuth; I've got to."

I think if she'd seen it coming she would have stood back; perhaps I'd have missed her. I think that if she'd expected it, she would have fled after I hit her once. Instead she stood still, unutterably shocked, unmoving, so it was easy to hit her again.

She stood watching me, her face dead, her eyes, and, increasingly, the flames of the fingermarks on her bleached cheeks, burning. In that instant I knew how she felt, what her mind was trying frantically to do. She was trying to think of a way to make this a dream, to explain it as an accident, to find some excuse for me; and the growing sting in her beaten cheeks slowly proved and reproved that it was true. I know this, because the tingling sting of my hands was proving it to me.

Finally she put one hand up to her face. She said, *Why?"*

I said, "Because you have kept a secret from me."

She closed her eyes, swayed. I did not touch her. Still with her eyes closed, she said:

"It wants to be left alone. It feeds on vital substance, but there is always an excess . . . there is in a healthy person, anyway. It only takes a small part of that excess, not enough to matter, not enough for anyone but a jealous maniac like you to notice. It lives happily in a happy person, it lives richly in a mind rich with the experience of the senses, feeding only on what is spare and extra. And you have made me unfit, forever and ever, with your prodding and scarring, and because you have found it out it can never be left alone again, it can never be safe again, it can never be safe while you live, it can never be content, it can never leave me while I live, it can never, it can never, it can never." Her voice did not trail off—it simply stopped, without a rise or fall in pitch or volume, without any normal human aural punctuation. What she said made no sense to me; it was then that I was sure she had known all along what was wrong with her, that she had concealed it from me, that if I had beaten her sooner I'd have gotten the whole mad thing from her, that what she was doing now was to cloak the truth in cryptic histrionics. I snarled at her—I don't think it was a word—and turned my back. I heard her fall, and when I looked she was crumpled up like a castoff, empty, trodden-on white paper box.

I FOUGHT my battle between fury and tenderness that night, and met the morning with the dull conclusion that Grace was possessed, and that what had possessed her had gone mad . . . that I didn't know where I was, what to do; that I must save her if I could, but in any case relentlessly track down and destroy the—the—No, it hadn't a name . . . Grace was conscious, docile, and had nothing to say. She was not angry or resentful; she was nothing but—obedient. She did what she was told, and when she finished she stopped until she was told to do something else.

I called in Doc Knapp. He said that what

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was mostly wrong with her was outside the field of a medical doctor, but he didn't think a little regimented rest and high-powered food therapy would hurt. I let him take her to the hospital. I think I was almost glad to see her go. No I wasn't. I couldn't be glad. How could I be glad about anything? Anyway, Knapp would have her rested and fed and quieted down and fattened up and supplied with two alcohol rubs a day, until she was fit to start some sort of psycho-therapy. She always liked alcohol-rubs. She killed her—she died just before the second alcohol rub, on the fourth day . . . Knapp said, when he took her away, "I can't understand it, Helmuth. It's like shock, but in Grace that doesn't seem right at all. She's too strong, too alive."

Not any more, she isn't.

My mind's wandering. Hold on tight, you . . . Hold. . . .

Where am I? I am at home. I am sitting in the chair. I am getting up. Uh! I have fallen down. Why did I fall down? Because my leg was asleep. Why was it asleep? Because I have been sitting here all day and most of the night without moving. The doorbell is ringing. Why is the doorbell ringing? Because someone wants to come in. Who is it? Someone who comes visiting at two o' eight in the morning, I know that because I started the clocks again and Tinkle says what time it is. Who visits at two o' eight in the morning? Drunks and police and death. There is a small person's shadow on the frosted door, which I open, "Hello small person, Grace is dead." It is not a drunk it is not the police it is Death who has a child's long lashes and small hands, one to hold up a blank piece of paper for me to stare at, one to slide the knife between my ribs, feel it scrape on my breastbone . . . a drama, Enter Knife Left Center, and I fall back away from the door, my blood leaping lingering after the withdrawn blade, Grace, Grace, treasure me in your cupped hands—

VI

Lawrence Delehanty

I GOT THE call on the car radio just before half-past two. Headquarters had a phone tip of some funny-business out on Poplar Street in Homeland. The fellow who phoned was a milk-truck dispatcher on his way to work. He says he thought he saw someone at the door of this house stab the guy who came to the door, close the door and beat it.

I didn't see anyone around. There were lights on in the house—in what seemed to be the living room, and in the hallway just inside the door. I could see how anyone passing by could get a look at such a thing if it had happened.

I told Sam to stay in the prowl-car and ran up the path to the house. I knocked on the door, figuring maybe there'd be prints on the bell-push. There was no answer. I tried again, and finally opened the door, turning the knob by the shaft, which was long enough for me to get ahold of without touching the knob.

It had happened all right. The stiff was just inside the door. The guy was on his back, arms and legs spread out, with the happiest look on his face I ever saw. No kidding—that guy looked as if he'd just been given a million dollars. He had blood all over his front.

I took one look and went back and called Sam. He came up asking questions and stopped asking when he saw the stiff. "Go phone," I told him, "and be careful. Don't touch nothin'." While he was phoning I took a quick squint around. There was a few dirty dishes in the kitchen sink and on the table, and half a bottle of some liqueur on an end-table in the living room, sitting right on the polished wood, where it'd sure leave a ring. I'd say this guy had been in there some time without trying to clean up any.

I inched open the drawer in the big sideboard in the dining room and all the silver was there. None of the drawers in the two bedrooms was open; it looked like a grudge-killing of some kind; there wasn't no robbery I could see.

Just as I came back down the stairs the doorbell rang. Sam came out of the front room and I waved him back. "There goes our prints on the bell," I said. "I'll get it." I pussyfooted to the door and pulled it wide open, real sudden.

"Mr. Stoye?" says a kid standing there. He's about fourteen, maybe, small for his

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age. He's standing out there, three o'clock in the morning, mind you, smiling real polite, just like it was afternoon and he'd come around to sell raffle tickets. I felt a retch starting in my stomach just then—don't know why. The sight of the stiff hadn't bothered me none. Maybe something I ate. I swallowed it down and said, "Who are you?"

He said, "I would like to see Mr. Stoye."

"Bub," I said, "Mr. Stoye isn't seeing anybody just now. What do you want?"

He squinted around me and saw the stiff. I guess I should've stopped him but he had me off-guard. And you know, he didn't gasp or jump back or any of the things you expect anyone to do. He just straightened up, and he smiled. "Well, he says, sort of patting his jacket pocket, "I don't s'pose there's anything I can do now," and he smiles at me, real bright. "Well, good night," he says, and turns to go.

I nabbed him and spun him inside and shut the door. "What do you know about this?" I asked him.

He looked at the stiff, where I nodded, and he looked at me. The stiff didn't bother him. "Why, nothing," he said. "I don't know anything at all. Is that really Mr. Stoye?"

"You know it is."

"I think I did know, all right," he said. "Well, can I go home now? Dad doesn't know I'm out."

"I bet he doesn't. Let's see what you got in your pockets."

He didn't seem to mind. I frisked him. Inside that jacket pocket was a jump-knife—one of those Army issue paratrooper's clasp-knives with a spring; touch the button and *click!* you've got four and a half inches of razor-steel sticking out of your fist, ready for business. A lot of 'em got out in war surplus. Too many. We're always finding 'em in carcasses. I told him he'd have to stick around. He frowned a little bit and said he was worried about his father, but I didn't let that make no difference. He gave his name without any trouble. His name was Ronnie Daniels. He was a clean-cut little fellow, just as nice and polite as I ever saw.

Well, I asked him all kinds of questions. His answers just didn't make no sense. He said he couldn't recall just what it was he wanted to see Stoye about. He said he had never met Stoye and had never been out here before. He said he got the address from knowing the phone number; went right up to the telephone company and wormed it out of one of the girls there. He said he didn't remember at all where he got the number from. I looked at the number just out of curiosity; it was Homeland 2065, which didn't mean nothing to me.

After that there wasn't anything to do until the homicide squad got there. I knew the kid's old man, this Daniels, would have to get dragged into it, but that wasn't for me to do; that would be up to the detective looey. I turned the kid over to Sam. I remember Sam's face just then; it turned pale. I asked him what was the matter but he just swallowed hard and said he didn't know; maybe it was the pickles he had with his midnight munch. He took the kid into the front room and they got into a fine conversation about cops and murders. He sure seemed to be a nice, healthy, normal kid. Quiet and obedient—you know. I can't really blame Sam for what happened.

The squad arrived—two carloads, sirens and all, making so much noise I thought sure Stoye would get up and tell 'em to let him rest in peace—and in they came—photogs, print men, and the usual bunch of cocky plainclothes men. They swarmed all over. Flick was the man in charge, stocky, tough, mad at everybody all the time, especially on the night detail. Man, how he hated killers that worked at night and dragged him away from his pinochle!

I TOLD the whole story to him and his little book. "His name's Tommy," I said, "and he says he lives at—"

"His names Ronnie," says Sam, from behind me.

"Hey," I says. "I thought I told you to stay with him."

"I had to go powder my nose," says Sam. "My stomach done a flip-flop a while back that had me worried. It's okay. Brown was dusting in the room there when I went out. And besides, that's a nice little kid. He wouldn't—"

"Brown!" Flick roared.

Brown came out of the living room. "Yeah, Chief."

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"You done in the front room?"

"Yeah; everything I could think of. No prints except Stoye's, except on the phone. I guess they'd be Sam's."

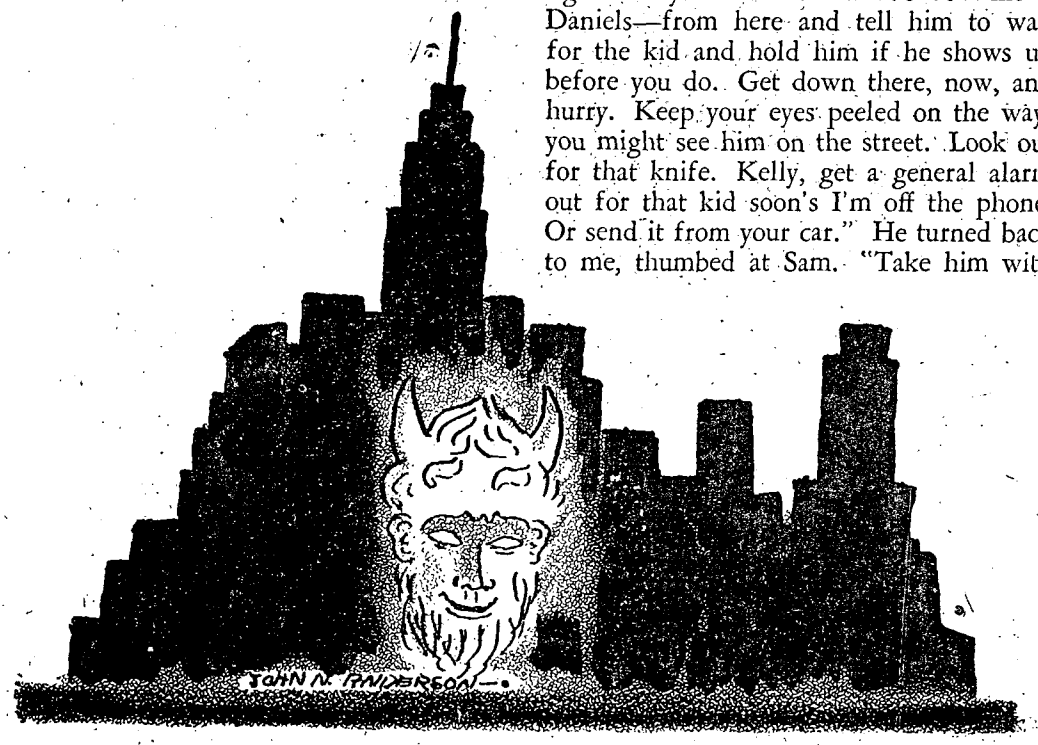
"The kid's all right?"

"Was when I left," said Brown, and went back into the living room. Flick and me and Sam went into the front room.

The kid was gone.

Sam turned pale. "Ronnie!" he bellows. "Hey, you, Ronnie!"

No answer.



"You hadda go powder your big fat nose," says Flick to Sammy. Sam looked bad. The soft seats in a radio car feel awful good to a harness bull, and I think Sam decided right then that he'd be doing his job on foot for quite a while.

It was easy to see what had happened. Sammy left the room, and then Brown got finished and went out, and in those few seconds he was alone the kid had stepped through the short hall into the kitchen and out the side door. Sam looked even worse when I suddenly noticed that the ten-inch ham slicer was gone from the knife-rack; that was one of the first things I looked at after I saw Stoye had been stabbed. You always look for the kitchen knives in a home stabbing.

Flick turned to Sam and opened his mouth, and in that moment, believe me, I was glad I was me and not him even if Sam has got the most whistlable wife I ever saw. I thought fast. "Flick," I said, "I know where that kid's going. He was all worried about what his old man would think. Here—I got his address in my book."

"Okay," snapped Flick. "Get down there right away. I'll call what's-his-name—Daniels—from here and tell him to wait for the kid and hold him if he shows up before you do. Get down there, now, and hurry. Keep your eyes peeled on the way; you might see him on the street. Look out for that knife. Kelly, get a general alarm out for that kid soon's I'm off the phone. Or send it from your car." He turned back to me, thumbed at Sam. "Take him with you," he says, "I want him out of my sight. And if his hot damned nose gets shiny again see he don't use your summons-book."

We ran out and piled into the car and took off. We didn't go straight to Daniels' address. Sam hoped we would see the kid on the way; I think he had some idea of a heroic hand-to-hand grapple with the kid in which maybe he'd get a little bit stabbed in line of duty, which might quiet Flick down some. So we cut back and forth between Myrtle Avenue and Varick; the kid could've taken a trolley on one or a bus on the other. We found out soon enough that he'd done neither; he'd found a cab; and

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I'd like to know who it was drove that hack. He must've been a jet pilot.

It was real dark on Daniels' street. The nearest streetlight was a couple hundred feet away, and there was a big maple tree in Daniels' yard that cast thick black shadow all over the front of the house. I missed the number in the dark and pulled over to the curb; I knew it must be somewhere around here.

Me and Sam got out and Sam went up on the nearest porch to see the house number; Daniels was two doors away. That's how it was we happened to be far to the left of the house when the killer rang Daniels' bell.

We both saw it, Sam and me, that small dark shadow up against Daniels' front door. The door had a glass panel and there was some sort of a night-light on inside, so all we saw was the dark blob waiting there, ringing on the bell. I guess Daniels was awake, after Flick's phone call.

I grabbed Sam's arm, and he shook me free. He had his gun out. I said, "What are you gonna do?" He was all hopped up, I guess.

He wanted to make an arrest or something. He wanted to be The Man here. He didn't want to go back on a beat. He said, "You know how Stoye was killed. Just like that."

That made sense, but I said, "Sam! You're not going to shoot a kid!"

"Just wing him, if it looks—"

JUST then the door opened. There wasn't much light. I saw Daniels, a stocky, balding man with a very mild face, peering out. I saw an arm come up from that small shadowy blob. Then Sam fired, twice. There was a shrill scream, and the clatter of a knife on the porch. I heard Ronnie yell, "Dad! Dad!" Then Sam and I were pounding over to the house. Daniels was frozen there, staring down onto the porch and the porch steps.

At the foot of the steps the kid was huddled. He was unconscious. The ham-slicer gleamed wickedly on the steps near his hand.

I called out, "Mr. Daniels! We're the police. Better get back inside." And together Sam and I lifted up the kid. He didn't weigh much. Going inside, Sam tripped over his big flat feet and I swore at him.

We put the kid down on the couch. I didn't see any blood. Daniels was dithering around like an old lady. I pushed him into a chair and told him to stay there and try to take it easy. Sam went to phone Flick. I started going over the kid.

There was no blood.

There were no holes in him, either; not a nick, not a graze. I stood back and scratched my head.

Daniels said, "What's wrong with him? What happened?"

Inside, I heard Sam at the phone. "Yeah, we got 'im. It was the kid all right. Tried to stab his old man. I winged him. Huh? I don't know. We're looking him over now. Yeah."

"Take it easy," I said again to Daniels. He looked rough. "Stay right there."

I went to the door, which was standing open. Over by the porch rail I saw something shining green and steel-blue. I started over to it, tripped on something yielding, and went flat on my face. Sam came running out. "What's the—*uh!*" and he came sailing out and landed on top of me. He's a big boy. I said, "My goodness, Sam, that was careless of you," or words to that effect, and some other things amounting to maybe Flick had the right idea about him.

"Damn it, Delehanty," he says, "I tripped on something. What are you doing sprawled out here, anyway?"

"I was looking for—" and I picked it up, the green and steel-blue thing. It was a Finnish sheath-knife, long and pointed, double razor-edges, scroll-work up near the hilt. Blood, still a bit tacky, in the scroll-work.

"Where'd that come from?" grunted Sam, and took it. "Hey! Flick just told me the medic says Stoye was stabbed with a two-edged knife. You don't suppose—"

"I don't suppose nothin'," I said, getting up. "On your feet, Sam. Flick finds us like this, he'll think we're playing mumblety-peg . . . tell you what, Sam; I took a jump-knife off the kid out there, and it only had a single edge. And that ham-slicer has only a single edge." I went down the steps and picked it up. Sam pointed out that the kid

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had never had a chance to use the hamsliver.

"I shrugged that off. Flick was paid the most for thinking—let him do most of the thinking. I went to the side of the door and looked at the bell-push to get an idea as to how it might take prints, and then went inside. Sam came straight in and tripped again.

"Pick up ya feet!"

Sam had fallen to his knees this time. He growled something and, swinging around, went to feeling around the porch floor with his hands. "Now it's patty-cake," I said. "For pete's sake, Sam—"

Inside Daniels was on the floor by the couch, rubbing the kid's hands, saying, real scared like, "Ronnie! Ronnie!"

"*Delehanty!*"

Half across the room, I turned. Sam was still on his knees just outside the door, and his face was something to see. "Delehanty, just come here, will you?"

There was something in his voice that left no room for a wisecrack. I went right to him. He motioned me down beside him, took my wrist and pushed my hand downward.

It touched something, but—*there was nothing there!*

We looked at each other, and I wish I could write down what that look said.

I touched it again, felt it. It was like cloth, then like flesh, yielding, then bony.

"It's the Invisible Man!" breathed Sam, bug-eyed.

"Stop talking nonsense," I said thickly. "And besides, it's a woman. Look here."

"I'll take your word for it," said Sam, backing away. "Anyhow, I'm a married man."

Cars came, screaming as usual. "Here's Flick."

Flick and his mob came streaming up the steps. "What's going on here? Where's the killer?"

SAM stood in front of the doorway, holding his hands out like he was unsnarling traffic. He was shaking. "Walk over this side," he said, "or you'll step on her."

"What are you gibbering about? Step on who?"

Sam flapped his hands and pointed at the floor. Flick and Brown and the others all looked down, then up again. I don't know what got into me. I just couldn't help it. I said, "He found a lady-bug and he don't want you to step on it."

Flick got so mad, so quick, he didn't even swear. He made a sort of bubbling noise and pushed past Sam into the house. Sam looked at me and said, "My pal."

Before he could kill me I said, "He'll find out soon enough." That stopped Sam; he thought it over and then began to grin. Flick really had something in store for him.

We went inside. The medic was working over the boy, who was still unconscious. Flick was demanding, "Well? Well? What's the matter with him?"

"Not a thing I can find out, not without a fluoroscope and some blood-tests. Shock, maybe."

"Shot?" gasped Daniels.

"Definitely not," said the M. O.

Flick said, very, very quietly, "Sam told me over the phone that he had shot the boy. What about this, Delehanty? Can you talk sense, or is Sam contagious?"

I told him what we had seen from the side of the house. I told him that we couldn't be sure who it was that rang the bell, but that we saw whoever it was raise a knife to strike, and then Sam fired, and then we ran up and found the kid lying at the bottom of the steps. We heard a knife fall.

"Did you hear him fall down the steps?"

"No," said Sam.

"Shut up, you," said Flick, not looking at him. "Well, Delehanty?"

"I don't think so," I said, thinking hard. "It all happened so fast."

"It was a girl."

"What was a girl? Who said that?"

Daniels shuffled forward. "I answered the door. A girl was there. She had a knife. A long one, pointed. I think it was double-edged."

"Here it is," said Sam brightly.

Flick raised his eyes to heaven, moved his lips silently, and took the knife.

"That's it," said Daniels. "Then there was a gunshot, and she screamed and fell."

"She did, huh? Where is she?"

"I—I don't know," said Daniels in puzzlement.

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"She's still there," said Sam smugly. I thought, oh-oh. This is it.

"Thank you, Sam," said Flick icily. "Would you be good enough to point her out to me?"

Sam nodded. "There. Right there," and he pointed.

"See her, lying there in the doorway," I piped up.

Flick looked at Sam, and he looked at me. "Are you guys trying to—*uk!*" His eyes bulged, and his jaw went slack.

Everyone in the room froze. There, in plain sight on the porch, lay the body of a girl. She was quite a pretty girl, small and dark. She had a bullet hole on each side of her neck, a little one here and a great big one over here.

VII

Theodore Sturgeon

I DON'T much care for the way this story's going.

You want to write a story, see, and you sit down in front of the mill, wait until that certain feeling comes to you, hold off a second longer just to be quite sure that you know exactly what you want to do, take a deep breath, and get up and make a pot of coffee.

This sort of thing is likely to go for days, until you are out of coffee and can't get more until you can pay for same, which you can do by writing a story and selling it; or until you get tired of messing around and sit down and write a yarn purely by means of knowing how to do it and applying the knowledge.

But this story's different. It's coming out as if it were being dictated to me, and I'm not used to that. It's a haywire sort of yarn; I have no excuses for it, and can think of no reasons for such a plot having unfolded itself to me. It isn't that I can't finish it up; far from it—all the plot factors tie themselves neatly together at the end, and this with no effort on my part at all.

This can be demonstrated; it's the last chapter that bothers me. You see, I didn't write it. Either someone's playing a practical joke on me, or— No. I prefer to believe someone's playing a practical joke on me. Otherwise, this thing is just too horrible.

But about that demonstration: here's what happened:

* * * * * *

Flick never quite recovered from the shock of seeing that sudden corpse. The careful services of the doctor were not required to show that the young lady was dead, and Flick recovered himself enough to start asking questions.

It was Daniels who belatedly identified her as the nurse he had seen at the hospital the day Mrs. Stoye killed herself. The nurse's name was Lucille Holder; she had come from England as a girl; she had a flawless record abroad and in this country. The head doctor told the police, on later investigation, that he had always been amazed at the tremendous amount of work Miss Holder could turn out, and had felt that inevitably some sort of a breakdown must come. She went all to pieces on Mrs. Stoye's death, and he sent her on an immediate vacation.

Her movements were not difficult to trace, after she left the administrative office, where she ascertained Mr. Daniels' address. She went first to his house, and the only conclusion the police could come to was that she had done so on purpose to kill him. But he was not there: he, it seems, had been trying to find her at the hospital at the time! So she left. The following night she went out to Stoye's, rang the bell, and killed him.

Ronnie followed her, apparently filled with the same unaccountable impulse, and was late. Miss Holder went then to Daniel's house and tried to kill him, but was shot by the policeman, just as Ronnie, late again, arrived.

Ronnie lay in a coma for eight weeks. The diagnosis was atypical brain-fever, which served as well as anything else. He remembered little, and that confused. He did, however, vouch for the nurse's visit to his home the night of Mrs. Stoye's death. He could not explain why he had kept it a secret from his father, nor why he had had the impulse to kill Mr. Stoye (he admitted this impulse freely and without any horror) nor how he had happened to think

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of finding Stoye's address through the information operator at the telephone company. He simply said that he wanted to get it without asking any traceable questions. He also admitted that when he found that Mr. Stoye had already been killed, he felt that he must secure another weapon and go and kill his father. He says he remembers thinking of it without any emotion whatsoever at the time, though he was appalled at the thought after he came out of the coma. "It's all like a story I read a long time ago," he said. "I don't remember doing these things at all; I remember seeing them done."

When the policemen shot Miss Holder, Ronnie felt nothing; the lights went out, and he knew nothing until eight weeks later.

These things remained unexplained to the participants:

MRS. STOYE'S disappearing body. The witnesses were the two Daniels and Miss Holder. Miss Holder could not report it; Ronnie did not remember it; Mr. Daniels kept his own counsel.

Lucille Holder's disappearing body. Daniels said nothing about this either, and for the rest of his life tried to forget it. The members of the homicide detail and the two prowl-car men tried to forget it, too. It was not entered in the records of the case. It seemed to have no bearing, and all concerned were happy to erase it as much as possible. If they spoke of it at all, it was in terms of mass hypnosis—which was reasonably accurate, at that. . . .

Lucille Holder's motive in killing Mr. Stoye and in trying to kill Mr. Daniels. This could only be guessed at; it was simple to put it down to the result of a nervous breakdown after overwork.

Mrs. Stoye's suicide. This, too, was attributed to a mounting mental depression and was forgotten as quickly as possible.

And two other items must be mentioned. The radio patrolmen Sam was called on the carpet by Detective Lieutenant Flick for inefficiency in letting the boy Ronnie go. He was not punished, oddly enough. He barely mentioned the corpse of Lucille Holder, and that there were witnesses to the fact that *apparently* the Lieutenant had not seen it, though he had stepped right over it on the way into Daniels' house. Flick swore that he was being framed, but let Sam alone thereafter.

The other item has to do with Miss Jennie Beaufort, an operator in the Information Office of the telephone company. Miss Beaufort won a prize on a radio quiz—a car, a plane, two stoves, a fur coat, a diamond ring, a set of SwingFree Shoulder pads, and a 38-day South American cruise. She quit her job the following day, took the cruise, enjoyed it mightily, learned on her return that income tax was due on the valuation of all her prizes, sold enough to pay the tax, and was so frightened at the money it took that she went back to work at her old job.

* * * * * *

So, you see, these tangled deaths, these mad actions, were all explained, forgotten, rationalized—made to fit familiar patterns, as were Charles Fort's strange lights and shapes in the night, as were the Flying Discs, the disappearance of Lord Bathhurst, the teleportation of Kaspar Hauser, and the disappearance of the crew of the *Marie Celeste*.

I leave it to the reader to explain the following chapter. I found it by and in my typewriter yesterday afternoon (I'd been writing this story all the previous night). Physically, it was the most extraordinary looking manuscript I have ever seen. In the first place the paper bails had apparently been released most of the time, and letters ran into each other and lines crossed and recrossed each other with wild abandon. In the second place there were very few capital letters; I was reminded of Don Marquis's heroic archy the cockroach, who used to write long effusions while Mr. Marquis was asleep, by jumping from one key to the other.

But archy was not heavy enough to operate the shift key, and so he eschewed the upper-case characters. In the third place, the spelling was indescribable. It was a mixture of phonetics and something like Speedwriting, or ABC shorthand. It begins this way:

> i mm a thngg wch livz n fantsy whr tru fantsy z fond n th mynz v mn.

I couldn't possibly inflict it all on you

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in its original form. It took me the better part of two hours just to get the pages in order—they weren't numbered, of course. After I plowed through it myself, I undertook a free translation. I have rewritten it twice since, finding more rhythm, more fluidity, each time, as I became familiar with the extraordinary idiom in which it was written. I think that as it now stands it closely follows the intent and mood of the original. The punctuation is entirely mine; I regard punctuation as inflection in print, and have treated this accordingly, as if it were read aloud.

I must say this: there are three other people who could conceivably have had access to this machine while I was asleep. They are Jeff and Les and Mary. I know for a fact that Jeff, who is an artist, was busy the entire time with a non-objective painting of unusual vividness and detail; I know how he works, and I know what the picture looked like when I quit writing for the night, and what it looked like when I woke up, and believe me, he must have been painting like mad the entire time—he and no one else. As for Les, he works in the advertising department of a book publisher and obviously has not the literary command indicated by this manuscript. And Mary—I am lucky enough to be able to say that Mary is very fond of me, and would be the last person in the world to present me with such a nasty jolt as is innate in this final chapter. Here is is; and please forgive me for this lengthy but necessary introduction to it, and for my intrusion; this sort of thing is strictly against the rules.

VIII

" "

I AM a Thing which lives in fantasy, where true fantasy lives in the minds of men.

What fumbling is this, what clumsiness, what pain. . . . I who never was a weight, who never turned, coerced, nor pressed a person, never ordered, never forced—I who live with laughter, die with weeping, rise and hope and cheer with man's achievements, yet with failure and despair go numb and cold and silent and unnoticeable—what have I to do with agony?

Know me, mankind, know me now and let me be.

Know the worst. I feed on you. I eat and breathe no substance but a precious ether. No, not souls (but where a soul is strong and clean I live my best.) I take this guarded essence where I can, and thrive on it; and when I choose a host I am imprisoned, for I may not leave him while he lives, and when he dies I must locate another to inhabit. And I have . . . powers.

But know this too: The thing that I take is the essence of joy—and in joy is created an excess of that which I need. I drink in your reservoir, yes; but when there is drought and the level is low, and your needs are increased, and the water turns bitter with flavors of worry, and anger, and fear, then I shrink and I soften, and lose all my hunger; and then if you grieve, if your spirit is broken, if you should forget all the pleasure and glory and wonder of being a man—then I die. . . .

Such a death is not death as you know it. It is more an encysting, a waiting unmoving within a soul's winter, to wake with the spring of the heart. But where people grieve over years, or let fear share their souls with me, then I must wait for the walls of my prison to crumble.

Then, after the death of my host I go drifting, seeking another. That is my Search; and in it, for me, is the ultimate cold. No human can know such a thing, for death, for a human, is kinder.

I am and I am not a parasite. I feed on your substance; yet what living thing in the world does not feed on the substance of others? And I take only excess—take only that which you radiate gaily when you feel joy.

When you feel otherwise, then I must wait, or must sleep, or must die. Where is the evil in being a parasite, when I take only a product which you never need? I demand only sustenance; that is the right of all living things. I ask in addition a thing which is simple enough—I ask to be left to myself, to encyst or to flower or sleep or be joyful, without any devilish probing.

I do not know how old I am; I do not know if there are others like me. I do not know how many hosts I have inhabited, or whether I was born or hatched, or whether,

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like a human, I must one day truly die. I shall, no doubt; I am alive, and nothing lives forever. I know my years are thousands, and my hosts have been in scores of hundreds. I have no interest in statistics.

Yet you must know me. . . . I think my origins were like a plant's—an accidental seed of sensuality perhaps. My infancy was passed in dreams, in sightless stirrings when the stimulation merited, and blacknesses between. I think that when my hosts passed on, my knotted insubstantial cyst just drifted like a petal on a roiling stream, it bumped and nuzzled and at last slipped in when chance presented hosts which qualified.

To qualify, in those uncaring phases, men had but to show an openness and nothing more. And when I gained experience and consciousness increased, and realization came to me, and I was grown and had ability to choose, I gained as well the power of rejection. And after that I was no longer bound to sickly children, open to me through their thirst for colors, senses, odors, vivid to them through unsaid convictions that the end was near. I became increasingly meticulous in choosing; I became an expert in detecting signs of whimsy-richness in its earliest potential. I have powers. . . .

You have powers too, you human ones. You can change the color of a life by vicious striking at a stranger-child. You can give away a thing you treasure, making memories which later might compose a symphony. You can do a thousand thousand things you never do; you never try; there is no reason to depart from paths you have established. When, however, circumstances force you into it, you do the "superhuman." Once my host was Annabelle, a woman on a farm. (She loved the birds!) In a blizzard she was lost; she was old and had a crippled knee, and could not find the road, and could not last the night. She stumbled on a post which stood erect and lonesome on the prairie, and, without a conscious thought of bravery, or what mankind might say of her, she put a hand upon the weathered wood, and in the blowing snow and bitter cold, she walked around the post—around, around, in spite of age and pain and growing numbness, walked around the post until the sun came up in blowing grey, then growing cold. They found her and they saved her, when in truth she saved herself. There was about her such a cloud of pure achievement, such a joy at having cheated wind and cold! (I fed that day; I still possess the energies she radiated!) . . . I have powers; all have powers, when we're forced to use them. I have powers, you have too, which you have never cataloged.

I have powers—now I use them!

I have no host. Such bitterness and agony as I have just experienced I never want again. My Search, this time, will be a thorough one and for it, now, I make my sacrifice. I am unknown; but with this script, these purposely hypnotic words, *I shall be known!* I sacrifice my privacy, my yearning for the pleasant weightless dark where I have dwelt. I challenge mankind's probing, for, through these bright words and burnished continuities, I shall locate a host who will defend me!

I had a man—he had me, possibly—who would have fought for me. And after him I dwelt within a woman's mind—the richest and most magical of all. The man was one of those who, on maturing, never lost the colorful ability to wonder like a child. And one day, miming, imitating a precise and dainty minuet in joyful incongruity (he danced alone upon the bouncing platform of a truck) a falling girder struck him and he died. I had no warning and no way to make a Search; I flung myself into the mind of one who was nearby in close communion with my dead host's whimsy.

Grace had a mind that was magic throughout. Never in thousands of years have I seen such a shimmering jewel; never in thousands of pages in words found in thousands of languages could such a trove be described. All that she saw was transmuted in sibilant subleties; all that she heard was in breathtaking colors and shapes. What she touched, what she said, what she saw, what she felt, what she thought—these were all blended in joy.

She was the pinnacle; she was the source of the heady exuberant food which in flavor eclipsed my most radiant memories. She, like the blizzard of Annabelle—she was the suitable circumstance, bringing about the release of the powers I held all untried

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I stirred in her mind. I found I could reach out and touch certain sources of hunger—sights that she never had seen and sensations she never had turned to, things which should surely delight such a sensitive soul.

I found to my joy that with care I controlled them, the hungers for things I remembered in hosts less responsive. I practiced this skill as she broadened her life, and I led her to music and poems and thoughts which she never, perhaps, could have found by herself. She had every reason for happiness with all these riches, and I—oh, I gloried in bringing things to her, as many a gifted composer has brought a new music to some virtuoso.

But her husband was Stoye.

Stoye was a devil. He hated me for what I was, before he could define it. His mind was quite as rich as hers, but something curbed it. Growing with her was impossible; he sensed with rare perception that a Thing had come to her, and since that Thing was not of him, he hated it. It mattered not to him that she was better for it. Brutally he turned away from sharing what I brought into his home. And she—I could not take her from him. How I tried! Poor treasure-trove, she was at last a battle-ground between that questing creature and myself. He hounded me through her, and I struck back by taking her to rare enchantments in which he could not share.

He was the first—the very first— of all the humans I have known, to recognize me and to seek me out. This recognition was intolerable; all my life I have avoided it, and lived in warm and secret joyfulness. He goaded me until I evidenced myself; I never realized I could make a human speak, but Grace spoke for me when she said that "It wants only to be let alone." She might as well have died, right then and there, for all the sustenance I got from her therefore. I knew that she would kill herself; between us, her and me, there was a madness caught from Stoye.

Stoye put her, numb and docile, in the hospital. I started to encyst, for Grace's well was dry to me. I found a likely subject in the nurse, who seemed as sensitive as Grace (but lacked that fine capacity for whimsy) and I poised myself to make the change. While waiting, then, I thought of Stoye—and realized that, with Grace's death, he would not rest until he found me and destroyed me, either by attacking all my hosts, or if he learned the way of it, by closing minds against me by his printed propaganda. He had to be destroyed.

Grace killed herself; her one blind foolishness, her love for Stoye, and all her stupid thoughts that she had lost it, made her do it. I might have stopped her; but why should I, when I needed a release from all her bitterness? Believe me, it was just as strong as all her joys had been . . . before she leaped she tried to warn him, tried to send some crazy message to him through a youngster standing down below. My connection with her was not close just then; I am not sure; she still was set on death as an escape but wished her husband to be watchful and protect himself. And then she leaped.

And then it came—that awful amputation.

I could not know that Ronnie was so strong a host, potentially—that so well suited to me was he that, as I flashed upward to the nurse, to take possession, I was torn apart!

I HAVE no substance; yet I am an entity, with limits and with boundaries. These were ruptured; while my greater part found room within the nurse's mind, a fragment nestled into Ronnie's.

At first I felt a transcendental pain and dizziness; and then I did the things I could to be protected. I hid the crumpled body with a forced hypnotic wave (this is no subtle mystery; a thousand men can do it) to keep the wave of terror all confused with curiosity, for terror undiluted quite inhibits my possession of a host.

I settled into Lucille Holder's mind and tested the controls which Stoye had forced me to develop. Lucille was far less strong than Grace had been, and forcing her was easy. I was wounded, I was maddened, and at last I drank, with purpose and a new dark joy, the thing called hate.

Stoye had to die. The man called Daniels, Ronnie's father, saw Grace leap and was a witness. Possibly he might become too curious, with his son possessed, and be another probing devil. He must die. Ronnie had a

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part of me, and I did not think he could release it while he lived. So he must die.

To test my new controls, I sent the nurse at first to do the minor task. The elder Daniels was not there; and when I found myself confronted with that other part of me, I nearly died of yearning. And I realized, in that closeness, that the boy could be controlled as well, and that he could destroy his father quite at my convenience, while Lucille could kill him later. Satisfied, I went away.

I SPENT that night and all next day securing my controls, and practicing. And late the night that followed, I killed Stoye, and two strange things happened.

One was when Stoye died; I felt a wave of powerful protectiveness about him as he fled his body, and I sensed again the fullest, richest magic that was Grace. I was terrified of it; I had never known before that humans could outlive their carcasses . . .

The other thing was the arrival of Ronnie, apparently moved by the part of me carried within him. Yet since he possessed but a fragment, his effort was late and his motive was weak, and I feared that he might make a botch of the killing of Daniels. I therefore sent Lucille to do it; Ronnie, again weak and tardy, followed my orders.

The gunshot, the bullet which shattered the neck of the nurse, were quite unexpected. I was flung unprepared into cold, in my nakedness, cold indescribable, cold beyond bearing. Yet I was glad; for the fraction of me that was Ronnie's came streaming toward me as I was exploded away from the nurse. The wrench it gave Ronnie must have been dreadful; when I settle into a host all my roots go down deep.

I hid Lucille's body and searched all the minds in the house for a suitable host. Ronnie was perfect, unconscious and closed. Daniels was fretful; I can't abide fear. I fought back the cold, drew inward, contracted, and formed, at long last, a new cyst. I let Lucille's body be seen, and ignoring the others—their whimsy was flat as their oversized feet—I withdrew.

And I have been thinking.

Some things were important that now cannot matter. I am different because of the searchings of Stoye—I blame him for all that has happened, and that is a thing which can no longer matter. I know how to hate now, and how to make murder; the taste of these things is still bitter, but so is the taste of good stout when first taken, and stout has a taste worth acquiring. Like Grace I still have have all my earlier qualities—the sun on a mountain or watching the curve of the wing of a gull (through a host) certainly has all the zest for me that it has ever had. Now I have more, though; and that is a thing which can matter very much indeed.

I have been selfish. It never occurred to me, back in the days of the man who did minuets joyfully, that I might do something *for* him whom I choose as a host. Grace taught me that, purely by feeding me richly through her experiences, purely by being a subject for my schooled suggestions. There may have been many who carried me, who were susceptible to my control. I could not know without trying, and I never tried this command until Grace took me in. And since then I hunger, I thirst for the richness and beauty and shifting and changing of colors and sounds which she brought me, and never again will rest and be fed and be happy to have just enough to sustain me.

I drift, now, encysted, but testing my powers when never before had I thought of them. I find I am mobile; also, to certain degrees, I can move things—this writing machine, for example, though it is slow and laborious. I find I can whisper to humans and fit some strange thoughts and ideas to each other.

I have looked for a host for a weary, cold while, and my energies seem to be dwindling. I still have enough, though, to search for a time, and soon now I'll have what I need.

"I'll find, soon, a person, a man or a woman, or even a sensitive child. This one will be mine and I'll lead him to wonders of sense and of music and heady adventure. I think I am learning to savor the tartness of terror, the bloody salt flavor of killing with purpose. My host will exist in a series of colorful pageants and move in a world of emotional riches, all of my carefullest choosing.

And for this I sacrifice that which I guarded—my passion for quiet and secret

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enjoyments. I say to you, Know me! Suspect me! for by your suspicion you open yourself to my coming. And when some great mural is painted by someone who never did passable work in his life before that, suspect me. And when in a prison some cringing psychotic says, over and over, "A voice said to do it!" suspect me. Whenever you walk in the street and feel a strange spasm of nausea, suspect me indeed; for then I am injured, and what you have seen is a part-host like Ronnie; and know that that person must die—and can kill if I will it, and might kill in ways which afford me enjoyment.

I am so cold. . . .

I write this because in my search for a host who is perfect, I find that one segment of humans is almost entirely open. These are the readers and tellers of tales of the dark and of terror and madness. The one who has written these chapters would serve as a host—but I fear he would turn on me, feed on my memories, use me for piddling profit in plying his trade. Besides, he's a bit superficial for one of my tastes. I know his intentions, however, and what he will do with this script. I know he is frightened because of the way this long tale has unfolded, I know, too, that nothing will keep him from seeing it printed. When it is read, though, by thousands of like-minded people all over the world, and he hears of the music and murder created by someone who fell to me only through reading it, then he will curse and will wish he were dead, and wish he had torn this to pieces.

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The Indian Spirit Guide

BY ROBERT BLOCH

ORLANDO CROWN was a spook-hunter.

If you're a reader of magazines and the Sunday supplements of newspapers, you'll remember his name. Orlando Crown—amateur magician, amateur occultist, and professional ghost-buster. The man who made a standing offer of $25,000 to any medium or mystic producing satisfactory evidence of life beyond the grave. His articles and *exposés* of fraudulent psychic phenomena are famous.

Accordingly, when I determined to do a book on spiritualism, it was only natural that I take a little trip down to San Diego and seek out Orlando Crown.

"Show me a ghost," I said.

Crown laughed. He threw back his close-cropped gray head and brayed.

"Just like that, eh?" he chuckled. "The man wants me to show him a ghost. Now take it easy, friend—"

I took it easy. I explained everything; who I was, my purpose in coming to him, and the theme of my projected book. He stopped laughing and began to exhibit interest.

"Naturally, I wanted to get my material first hand from an expert," I told him. "So I came to you."

"Naturally," he agreed. "There is no one else qualified. And I assume you'd credit me with the data?"

That was the key, the clue I needed. I'd always wondered why a wealthy man like Orlando Crown bothered with the pursuit of such a peculiar hobby. The answer was—vanity.

"Credit you?" I said. "Why, if you'll do me the honor of serving as my instructor, I'll dedicate the book to you."

Crown beamed. He stood up and extended the slim, soft elegance of his hand.

Spook hunting is a peculiar kind of business with peculiar results

Heading by Lee Brown Coye

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"Come back tomorrow at two," he murmured. "I think I'll have something interesting for you."

II

CROWN'S roadster turned south, and the afternoon sun smote my eyes. We bumped along an unpaved street that looked like the butt-end of Tobacco Road. Lawns of brown weeds and sand suffered under the sun, unprotected by the withered palmettos which served as attractions only to the local dogs. Houses sagged behind rusted iron fences. On porches sun-blistered and paint-peeled, unlovely women rocked and fanned futilely. Towheaded brats peered from behind phlegm-green window shades. Heat-waves lent a wavering distortion to the flight of myriad flies, but did nothing to cut the stench of shriveled vegetation, rotting wood, sweat, garbage, and the frying odor of garbage soon to be.

"There's the place," said Orlando Crown, indicating a house. He might have been a psychic sensitive at that; I couldn't have distinguished this particular shack from any of the others. It was a wide two-story affair which might once have been painted yellow. The shades were drawn, the door was shut, and the only sign of occupancy was a battered blue coaster wagon which lay on its side against the steps. Its name was SPEEDY, according to the lettering on its frame, but when I stumbled against it I called it something else under my breath.

I fancied I saw the shades move slightly in a window to the left as we ascended the porch stairs, but I may have been mistaken. Orlando Crown pressed the buzzer and a sour whine echoed from within the house.

A sallow-faced Mexican girl opened the door. She brushed the perspiration from her mustache, wiped her hand on a strand of stringy hair, and said, "Yes, please?"

"Mrs. Hubbard. We have an appointment."

"I tell her. Wait here." Orlando Crown followed her into the hall, and I followed him. The corridor was dark and narrow, like a closet. And like a closet it smelled of mothballs and mustiness. There were doors on either side of the hallway, and the girl entered the one at our right.

We settled down in wicker chairs and waited. My chair was next to an end-table piled high with tattered magazines. I picked one up. It was a copy of *Film Fun* for January, 1932.

Orlando Crown smiled at me.

"This looks as if it might be interesting," he confided in a whisper. "There are usually two kinds of operators, you know. The first is the old-fashioned racketeer—the kind that puts up a big phony front, black drapes and brass gongs and music on the organ. The second group goes in for disarming simplicity; the 'natural medium' gag. From this build-up, I guess Mrs. Hubbard belongs to the second group."

"How did you happen to select her?" I asked.

"Haven't much choice," Crown shrugged. "You see, most of the spook workers in this part of the country know me by sight or reputation. Hate me like poison, of course. But this Mrs. Hubbard is a newcomer."

He found and lit a cigarette. I sat back and looked at "gag" pictures of such current comic celebrities as Harry Langdon, Jimmy Finlayson, Andy Clyde and Slim Summerville.

The silence was emphatic. It grew hotter, mustier. The hall became an oversized coffin. Time passed, but what's time when you're inside a casket?

Crown stepped on the butt of his cigarette. I sat there and listened to the worms bore through the woodwork. Then the door opened, we jumped, and the Mexican girl said, "In here, now."

Beyond the doorway was an ordinary parlor—"sitting-room" in the day when this house was built—filled with the usual scrolled oak furniture unholstered by a contemporary of Queen Anne. The wallpaper was Paris green, obscured in many places by large chromoes of the Saviour in meditation, exaltation and agony.

The center of the room was occupied by a "dining-room suite"; six chairs and a round table. Mrs. Hubbard sat in one of the chairs, her elbows on the table top.

She wasn't exactly Mrs. Hubbard—"Mother Hubbard" would be a more accurate tag. A fat, blowsy, red-faced woman in her mid-forties, with pork bristles on her

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arms and chin. Coarse brown hair nestled in a bun against the back of her high-necked black dress. There was something tragic about her deep-set eyes—here, if ever I saw one, was a woman who suffered. From a hangover.

"Greetings."

Her voice was as big as her body. It bounced off the walls and exploded against our eardrums.

"You are prompt, Mr. Bloch."

I nodded. Orlando had given my name as a cover-up, of course.

"And you have brought a guest, I see."

"Yes. I thought you wouldn't mind. This is—"

"I know." Mrs. Hubbard smiled slightly. "Please be seated, and I will endeavor to convince the skeptical Mr. Orlando Crown that I am indeed a psychic sensitive."

Crown's eyebrows lifted as his posterior lowered into a chair. He started to reply, but the Mexican girl opened the door again and ushered four more people into the room. We turned and stared at the fat, little red-faced man with the mustache, the portly matron in the flowered print dress, the pale, bespectacled blonde girl, and the gaunt gray-haired woman who fiddled with her coral beads.

Mrs. Hubbard, unsmiling, waved them to places at the table. They sat down with the ease and assurance of regular customers who had been here many times before. The Mexican girl brought in an extra chair and disappeared again.

NOBODY said a word. Orlando Crown watched Mrs. Hubbard. I watched Orlando Crown. Mrs. Hubbard didn't appear to be watching anybody. The whole affair had much of the quaint charm and jollity of an old-fashioned inquest.

I waited for something to happen. I waited for the closing of the blinds, the whisperings in the darkened room, the rappings and the wailings, the screech of chalk moving across a slate, the phosphorescent phantom issuing from the mouth of a moaning woman.

Instead, the Mexican girl appeared again. She carried a tablet of cheap, blue-ruled paper, a package of envelopes, and a handful of yellow pencils. This assortment made a nice little mess in the center of Mrs. Hubbard's dining-room table.

We watched as the girl rotated chunky thighs toward the door. The red-faced man fingered his mustache, the matron played with her purse, the girl with the glasses coughed, the gray-haired woman used her coral beads for a rosary.

"Will everybody take a pencil, a sheet of paper, and an envelope, please?"

Mrs. Hubbard was ready to go into her routine. We all groped for the props as directed.

"Because our group today is a little larger than usual, and because there is a natural reticence in the presence of strangers, I feel it best to have you put your problems in writing." Mrs. Hubbard patted her brown pug and smiled.

"I suggested that each of you write down one question, to begin with. If we have time, I shall be glad to work with your further inquiries personally—and privately, if you wish.

"At the moment, the important thing, frankly, is to gain your confidence. Without it, you will have no faith in my power, nor in my ability to help you. Since some of you are visiting me for the first time today, I'm going to make use of a rather spectacular device to convince you of my extra-liminal perception."

The deep, intelligent voice rolled smoothly, easily, persuasively, from the coarse mouth of that fat, sweating old woman.

"I'm not much of a showman—I cannot offer you a dark room, table tipping, ghostly presences. But if each one will write a question on a piece of paper, fold it up, and personally seal it in an envelope, perhaps I can demonstrate an interesting psychic phenomenon."

There was a pause, a shared feeling of hesitation. Mrs. Hubbard didn't have to be a mystic to sense it.

"Please. It's very simple. I am going to read your questions back to you as you have written them, without opening the envelopes."

Mrs. Hubbard smiled. "There will be no trickery. You can examine the paper, the pencils, the envelopes. You won't find any carbon, or wax, or acid treatments to bring out the writing. There will be no waiting.

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I'll read your questions back to you and then open your envelopes, one at a time. That should serve as convincing proof of the powers that work through me. Then I'll give you the answers.

"So if you'll write—please do, and make your questions sincere—whatever is closest to your mind and heart—"

The red-faced man scrawled something on his ruled sheet and folded it carefully four times. The matron licked the tip of her pencil and frowned. I shielded my paper and wrote: "Will my new book be written by fall?"

Mrs. Hubbard couldn't possibly have read our writing. She had risen and walked over to a small card-table set in the corner of the room. She drew up the extra chair and sat down behind the table, waiting until we folded the sealed and rustled.

"Bring your envelopes over personally, please," she called. "I don't want to be accused of switching."

We filed past the table and sat down again, all of us watching her as she collected the six envelopes, shuffled them carefully, and then placed them on the corner of the table.

She spread them out fanwise before her and frowned. Our chairs scraped back as we faced her. She switched on a lamp behind her and produced a wire filing basket.

There was no switching, no sleight-of-hand, no wires or buzzers, or gimmicks of any kind. We stared at Mrs. Hubbard and she stared down at the envelopes.

Her forehead corrugated. A fat hand reached out at random and lifted an envelope from the center of the fan. She placed it against the corrugations above her eyes. Her eyes closed.

Then she was speaking, and her voice came from far away—far away inside herself, far away inside the envelope.

"Should I sell my property to the syndicate or hold out for the original figure?" she whispered.

The red-faced, mustached little man popped up like a Jack-in-the-box. "That's it!" he shouted. "By Golly, that's my question!"

Orlando Crown never blinked. Everyone else was leaning forward, tense with excitement.

Mrs. Hubbard, eyes still closed, smiled at us. "Please, control your enthusiasm. It makes it more difficult to concentrate." She opened the envelope now, opened her eyes and glanced carelessly at the sheet, and then placed it in the wicker basket. And all the while she continued to talk.

"As it comes to me, Mr. Rogers, this property that you speak of consists of a bloc of eight lots situated just south of San Juan Capistrano, on 101-A, the coast drive. This syndicate of which you speak, the—"

Rogers opened his mouth and she paused. "Of course, I will not mention names if you prefer. But it is true, isn't it, that they plan to build a hotel on this site? And that yesterday they offered you $18,000 cash for an outright sale, while you are holding out for $25,000? I thought so. It appears that if you refuse, they will offer you $20,000 on Thursday. If you still refuse, on Monday they will meet your price."

Without pausing, the plump hand sought another envelope, pressed it to the red forehead. Eyes closed and mouth opened.

"Will my new book be written by fall?"

She was reading my question without opening the envelope!

I TRIED again to pierce Orlando Crown's bland stare. I tried to figure it out. There must be an angle, there was some kind of fakery somewhere, but it was too much for me. She had read my question without seeing it.

My mouth dropped open as I watched Mrs. Hubbard now carelessly unseal the envelope and slowly withdraw the folded paper. She unraveled it and then—her mouth opened.

Something red fluttered to the table; something bold and brazen, with a picture of a half-naked girl emblazoned on its crimson background.

It was the cover of the *Film Fun* magazine I'd been reading in the hall!"

Orlando Crown was on his feet, snatching at the cover. "My question, I believe," he said.

Mrs. Hubbard's mouth gulped for words. When they came, they sounded in a sweetly audible cadence.

"Why you dirty, stinking, lousy skunk!" said Mrs. Hubbard.

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III

SHE couldn't escape. We crowded around the table and Orlando Crown, inarticulate no longer, held forth.

"You see, it's very simple. The whole trick is old as the hills. While the audience is looking for mirrors, radio-electronic eyes and all kinds of elaborate devices, the fake mystic merely uses the old 'one ahead' system. All she needs for that is a stooge. In this case it was Rogers here."

The red-faced man who had popped up like a Jack-in-the-box now looked as though he would collapse like one. But the astute Mr. Crown now held his arm firmly.

"Here's how it works. The stooge writes his question and seals it like all the others, but he marks his envelope—just a nick with a fingernail, here at the flap. The medium looks for it and can recognize at a glance which one belongs to her confederate. Here."

He held up one of the unopened envelopes.

"This envelope she saves to the last. What she does is call out the stooge's question, which has been agreed upon in advance. He jumps up and makes a big fuss about hearing his question and she opens the envelope she's held to her forehead. Naturally, it's one of the envelopes containing a legitimate question. She reads it and puts it in the basket. While answering Mr. Roger's question—in convincing detail—she was actually reading Mr. Bloch's question from the envelope she opened. Then with the next envelope she would answer Mr. Bloch and open mine.

"But when she called Mr. Bloch's question, she opened my envelope and that was her mistake."

"You crummy rat," muttered Mrs. Hubbard. "What do you want from me?"

Crown shrugged. "Nothing at all, really, from you—except your promise to quit working a racket on people who are in need of genuine assistance from reputable consultants. I don't think you'll be trying these tricks around here very much longer."

"Why you damned—"

"Careful, now! Watch your language. You aren't very ladylike, Mrs. Hubbard. Of course, appearances are so deceptive, you folks must all remember that. For example, Mrs. Hubbard here does not use ladylike language, because she really isn't much of a lady. In fact—"

Orlando Crown's hand descended to pat Mother Hubbard's head. It rose again, clutching a brown-burned wig. We gaped down on a fat, bald-headed man who gripped the edge of the table with brawny knuckles and cursed in a hoarse voice that drove us all from the room.

Crown turned to the group as we reached the sidewalk and made a courtly bow. "My friends," he said. "I think our little session with the supernatural is over."

"Well, I never!" "Of all the things—" They spilled across the street, chattering and goggling. All but the old girl with the coral beads. She edged closer as Crown and I headed for our car.

"Pardon me," she sniffed. "I—I just wanted to thank you for what you did in there."

"No thanks necessary." Crown smiled and opened the car door.

"Oh, but you helped me a great deal. That horrid woman—person, I mean—had me almost convinced. I'd been coming to her for weeks for advice and she had nearly taken me away from Mrs. Prinn."

"Mrs. Prinn?"

"Yes. She's a *real* medium. I mean a genuine one, not a fake."

Crown winked at me, but the look he offered the woman was grave.

"Madam, if you will permit me to say so, all mediums are fakes."

"Oh, no!" The old lady put her hand to her cheek. "Maybe there are a lot of frauds like this one here, but not Mrs. Prinn! She doesn't try to fool you with tricks—she just summons up the spirits of the departed. She has a spirit guide, you know."

CROWN glanced impatiently at his watch. "Very interesting," he said. "But I assure you, as an investigator of long standing, that I have never encountered a genuine medium, a genuine apparition, or a spirit guide."

"You ought to meet Little Hatchet," the woman told him. "He's an Indian."

"An Indian spirit guide?" I asked. "You

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know, I've always wondered about that. Why do all the mediums seem to work through Indian spirit guides?"

Orlando Crown coughed. "We must be running along," he said. Then, to the woman, "We're going back downtown. If you'd care for a lift—"

"Thank you." The old lady made a prim little obeisance and opened the rear door of the roadster. "I think, under the circumstances, an introduction is warranted. I am Mrs. Celia Brewster."

We gave our names. Crown did the honors as he drove.

"No," said Mrs. Brewster. "Not really! I should have recognized you from your pictures in the paper—Orlando Crown! Why, everybody knows about you."

The Achilles' heel again. Crown positively smirked with pleasure.

"Yes, even Mrs. Prinn has spoken of you to us."

"Not favorably, I trust."

"Well—" The old lady had an embarrassed session with her beads. "Naturally, being a true medium, she rather resents some of the statements you've made about spiritualism."

"I shouldn't imagine so," I murmured.

"But if you could only see what she does, I'm sure you'd take back all of those remarks about fakery," Mrs. Brewster continued. She paused. "Come to think of it, why can't you see what she does? Yes, why don't you visit Mrs. Prinn as my guest?"

"Dear lady—" Crown began.

"It would be such an honor," the dear lady rattled on. "Such a distinct honor to have a great investigator present at one of her seances."

She had found the right note again. Crown glanced at me. "Well, I'm not really very interested. But Bloch here is looking for some material and I promised to take him around. What do you say? Would you like to see one of the old-fashioned spook sessions, with table-tipping and skeletons and musical trumpets, the works?"

He wanted me to say yes. I said yes.

"Very well. Of course, you mustn't let my name out to Mrs. Prinn. I don't know her and she wouldn't care to meet me."

"Just as you say, Mr. Crown. It will be a rewarding experience for both of us, I'm sure. I know you'll be convinced, once and for all, of the genuineness of communication from beyond."

"Or you will be convinced, once and for all, that it's a stupid fake," Crown retorted. "Indian spirit guides, eh? Chief Wahoo, is that it?"

"Little Hatchet." Mrs. Brewster corrected him with a dour smile. "He was an Oglalla Sioux, in mundane life. He first manifested himself to Mrs. Prinn in 1924, when she was just a girl. Since that time he has served as her spirit guide, bringing messages from those who have passed over—"

"At so much per message," Crown interrupted. "By the way, how much is the old fraud into you for?"

"Why several thou—oh, please, Mr. Crown, I wish you wouldn't talk like that! Can't you at least suspend judgment until you meet Mrs. Prinn?"

"Sorry. By the way, when do you plan this excursion?"

"Why, I have an appointment tomorrow evening at nine. Would that be convenient?"

"Certainly." Crown slid the car over to the curb and opened the door. "We park here, if that's convenient. Suppose I pick you up at eight-thirty, tomorrow evening. Where can I find you?"

Mrs. Brewster gave an address and Crown nodded as she stepped out of the car.

"Goodbye, now," she said, waving her beads.

"Goodbye," Crown called. And muttered, under his breath, "Don't take any wooden Indians."

IV

CROWN was in fine form the following evening. As we drove over to pick up Mrs. Brewster he regaled me at length with accounts of fake apports, telekinesis involving magnets, and the use of reaching-rods. Nor did he moderate his remarks when Mrs. Brewster joined us and we headed for the medium's apartments.

"You were asking me about Chief Running Nose—"

"Little Hatchet," Mrs. Brewster interjected, patiently.

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"Whatever you call him, then. Anyway, Bloch here raised the question of why most mediums seem to have Indian spirit guides."

"It bothers me," I said. "Why pick on the poor Indians all the time?"

Mrs. Brewster sniffed, but subsided as Crown answered with a grin devoid of malice.

"Years and years ago, when spiritualism first flourished commercially on the Continent, mediums hit upon the Noble Red Man as an ideal personification. To begin with, the Europeans were infatuated with the works of Cooper; later generations avidly devoured the lurid thrillers built around the exploits of Buffalo Bill. Indians were exotic to Europeans, just as Hindus would be to us. And weren't all Indians pictured as 'guides' in western romances of the day? The reasoning was simple—if Chief Hot Foot could find his way through the trackless wastes of Waukegan, surely he could lead the path through the realms of the spirit world.

"Besides, when the Indian guide spoke through the mouth of a medium, he could converse in gibberish. Nobody understood Indian languages, so the medium could bark out almost anything and sound authentic.

"So you see, it's just an old ghostly custom to use an Indian spirit guide. Nobody seems to wonder why good Indians—dead ones, that is—want to hang around fat old ladies and help them get through to spookville."

"But Mrs. Prinn's guide isn't an invention," Mrs. Brewster said, softly. "Little Hatchet really lived. If you've read anything on Indian ethnology, or the history of the Sioux, you'll find his name. He passed over at the Battle of the Little Big Horn. Custer's Massacre, you know. He can give you details, absolutely authentic proofs that—"

"That your Mrs. Prinn read about in books at the public library," Orlando Crown finished for her.

"I wish you'd refrain from condemning Mrs. Prinn in advance," said the old woman, rattling her coral beads in nervous earnestness. "Because I know you are going to be pleasantly surprised."

"I think she'll be surprised," answered Orlando Crown, grimly. "And I doubt if she'll find it pleasant."

"I haven't told her your name, but even if she finds out, it won't matter. Mrs. Prinn welcomes tests of her mediumship. If you only knew what she's told me about those who have passed over! And the very first time she knew all about me without my saying anything; she told me things that I'd never revealed to anyone. Oh, this is going to be a wonderful experience for a skeptic like yourself, Mr. Crown!"

"Apparently it begins now," he observed, as the car entered the driveway of an ornate apartment building. An attendant took the wheel and parked the roadster as we headed for the chromium-splashed foyer and took an elevator to the seventh floor.

"What have you got there?" I whispered, indicating the small black satchel Crown carried in one hand.

"You'll see," Crown answered. "It's all part of that wonderful experience we're going to have. I don't think Mrs. Prinn will go for it, and I know Little Hatchet will be mad as hell."

The elevator dumped us in front of a modernistic blonde oak door. Mrs. Brewster rang the bell and got chimes; the expensive, eight-tone kind. The sound alone told me that this seance would be quite a contrast to the sordid session of yesterday.

My assumption was correct. From the moment that the turbaned servant opened the door and bade us enter, we moved in an exotic world.

ONLY a Hollywood extremist could have designed that parlor. Everything was black. Black velvet drapes covering the walls, black mohair covering the low, modernistic furniture with the ebony frames, black velour rugs covering the black-tiled floor. There were niches set in the walls at intervals, and they housed statuettes—black, of course—which I recognized as coming straight from primitive mythology or an Oriental art jobber. Dim light illumined the forms of many-armed Kali, grinning Bast, and a goggling Tibetan thunder god. I smelled incense and perfume. I also smelled money, and a rat.

Crown winked at me in the gloom, but Mrs. Brewster was properly impressed. We

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sat there and fidgeted as the chimes rang again, the Hindu opened the door, and several other seekers after Mystery entered the parlor. They eyed us nervously, but no one spoke.

Kali waved. Bast grinned. The Tibetan figure goggled. And the incense sent sinuous strands of scent through the draped darkness.

Drugs, hypnosis, auto-suggestion? Perhaps all played a part, but after a little while I forgot that this was all a phony stage setting, I forgot that I was sweating under the arms, I forgot that there are no supernatural manifestations. I closed my eyes and then the music came stealing from far away, the gong sonorously sounded, and I was walking with the rest into another parlor, where the spider waited.

She sat behind the gigantic octagonal table, a wooden web spun to ensnare foolish flies. She sat there, dressed in darkness, and as she bowed her black head I saw a white part that curved like an eternal question mark.

Her eyes were deep pools, and her voice seemed to issue from them rather than from her mouth. Her hands made strange, Sybilline gestures as she greeted us and urged us to take our places around the table. Eight places, eight people.

I came out of it long enough to look at Crown. Orando Crown was obviously immune to exotic influences. His little eyes toured the room and blinked acknowledgment of all they saw. He noted the drapes, the candle-light, the deep recess at the far end of the chamber, the thick rug on the floor, the high ceiling with its beams set so as to obscure the faint, flickering flame of the candles.

Then he looked at Mrs. Prinn. He inspected her black velvet gown, eyeing the long, puffed sleeves. He glanced at her full skirt and at the loose slippers she wore. And then he jostled against me as the others took their places and managed to whisper, "This is going to be a pushover! Why, she's got the whole joint rigged up, you can see that—just an old-fashioned spook worker with enough props in her clothes to supply a whole tribe of Indians."

I nodded and then, as Mrs. Prinn glanced at us, sat down next to Crown.

There was a moment of coughing, a moment of rustling, a moment of settling back. Then came a long minute of complete silence. No organ music now, no gong, no chimes. Nothing but the soundless stirring of shadows in a room that was out of this world.

Mrs. Prinn sat there. Her gown was ebony, her flesh carved of marble. We waited for the statue to speak.

"Greetings. There are strangers amongst us this evening."

Mrs. Brewster opened her mouth, but a glance from the medium sufficed to still her.

"That does not matter. We welcome the presence of new converts. Even the presence of disbelievers does not disconcert us. There is no greater good for the Cause than the conversion of a skeptic to the truth.

"I see that the gentleman on the end"—she nodded at Orlando Crown—"has taken the liberty of bringing a black bag. From previous experience, I assume that he has some test in mind." She stared at Crown with a bleak smile.

"Oh, I'm sorry about this, Miss Prinn. Perhaps I should have told you. These gentleman—"

"No need to explain, Mrs. Brewster. The fact that they are your guests is enough for me." The smile was less bleak. "If our skeptical friends wish to test this seance in any way, I shall be only too happy to cooperate."

Crown placed his satchel on the table. Everybody gaped.

"What is it you wish?" purred Mrs. Prinn. "Do you want to tape the doors, seal them? Sprinkle the floor with powder? String ropes across the room, or nets? Would you like to bind my hands and feet? Consider me a willing martyr at the altar of Science."

THERE was a subtle mockery in her tone, and Orlando Crown responded.

"Nothing so elaborate, I assure you. I merely thought it might be interesting to vary the usual procedure—the joining of hands customary at a seance."

"What do you propose instead?"

"These."

Orlando Crown dumped a pile of gleaming silver onto the table top.

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"Handcuffs!" breathed Mrs. Brewster. "Oh, you aren't going to handcuff her, are you?"

"Not only her, but all of us. You see, I brought a dozen pair; enough and to spare."

"But—"

"Quite all right," said Mrs. Prinn. "We welcome tests. I assume you wish to place them upon our wrists at once. So if there are no objections, I'll ask Chardur to oblige."

"I'd rather see to it myself," Crown murmured.

"As you wish."

Orlando Crown was a fast man with a pair of cuffs. He passed around the table, linking wrist to wrist, trying and testing each set of cuffs and locking them into place quite securely. We sat chained to one another with but a single missing link.

"Now call Chardur, if you please." Crown sat down. "He can put the bracelets on me and complete the circle."

Chardur appeared, handcuffing Crown into place between Mrs. Brewster and myself.

"Does sahib wish me to keep the key?" inquired the Hindu.

"Not on your life! Sahib wishes you to put the key in his mouth."

"In his—?"

"You got me, brother! Put it in my mouth; I want to know where it is when the lights go out."

Orlando Crown grinned widely, and the key slipped into the grin.

"You may leave and lock the door, Chardur," called Mrs. Prinn. "But please extinguish the candles before you go."

"And after that," Crown called, "have the goodness to show yourself in the doorway as you go out. Just for the sake of skeptics."

THE candles went out. So did Chardur. Eight of us sat in darkness around a table, handcuffed together like prisoners in the black hull of a slave ship.

I don't know what it's like inside the hold of a slave ship, but I imagine the air is filled with squeaks and groans, with hoarse breathing and the creaking of wind and sea and the forces outside.

The forces outside—

We weren't in a slave ship, but there *were* forces outside. Creaks, Groans. A chill wind, sighing and swirling. And Mrs. Prinn's voice from far away. A deep voice, in deeper darkness.

"Can you hear me? Can you hear me? I'm calling . . . calling . . . can you hear?"

Silence.

"I'm trying to make you hear . . . we are waiting. . . . I'm trying to lose . . . hard to fight against . . . lose my . . ."

Silence.

"I come."

It wasn't her voice. I've heard imitators, ventriloquists, and drunken sluts in taverns—but no woman can truly mimic the deep bass of a man.

This was a man's voice, guttural and strained through black barriers.

"Hard to find way. Someone fighting. Someone evil."

It spoke like an Indian. It sounded like an Indian. And then—it looked like an Indian!

The whitness gathered over Mrs. Prinn's head. It wasn't phosphorescent, or filmy; it gave forth no glow to light up a single inch of surrounding space. It was merely a formless whiteness that assumed form. I saw a man's head and arms emerge as though from a hole in the darkness—a hole that might have been Mrs. Prinn's open mouth.

Indian? I couldn't be sure, even when I saw the single braid on the shaven skull, the single plums surmounting the dangling lock. The beaked nose emerged, and then the scarred or painted cheeks.

"Me Little Hatchet."

I was waiting for that, and I expected it to be corny. But it wasn't. Because I saw the face, emerging from nowhere; heard the voice emerging from nowhere. Or from somewhere not in this world.

"I come to warn. Evil here. Heap plenty. Enemy."

The handcuffed wrist attached to my own left hand now moved slowly. Crown was jerking my arm upwards.

"I see him. Gray-haired man. make trouble. I know name. Orlando Crown."

A great sigh went up, and this time I could recognize it as coming from Mrs. Prinn's mouth. The others were breathing hard. I listened, but at the same time I

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felt Crown's wrist moving mine up, up toward his mouth. Suddenly I understood his plan. He kept the key in his mouth for a purpose.

He now intended to unlock his own wrists from the handcuffs and creep over to investigate the Indian spirit guide. A clever man, Orlando Crown.

But apparently Little Hatchet didn't share my sentiments towards him. For the guttural voice doned on.

"He no believe. He no want truth: He want to make trouble, boast and lie. Spirits know. Spirits hate. Spirits send me to warn."

Fake or not, Mrs. Prinn knew Crown's name, all right. But how could she possibly know that—?

"He take off handcuffs now!"

The guttural voice was a triumphant shout.

"He come to find me. Must not do. Stay back!"

Crown had slipped away from my side at the table. There was a muffled murmur of movement in the darkness. The white blur swirled and swooped.

"Back! No—it is forbidden!"

I heard Crown gasp, knew that he was retreating to his chair again as the white figure of Little Hatchet soared forward, forcing him. The guttural voice was almost in my ear.

"Spirits command vengeance!"

THOSE were the last words I heard. But not the last sounds.

I heard a scream, and then something else —a sound I am sure that has not been uttered for over half a century on the face of the earth.

There was another scream, a groan, and then shrieks rose from all around the table. The white blur hovered over Crown; I tried to clutch at it, but felt nothing save the wave of ice that slithered up my arm, down my spine.

The first scream came from Crown, the shrieks came from the rest of the sitters, and now Mrs. Prinn was shouting in a normal voice.

"Lights! Hurry—lights!"

The shocking shape wavered into nothingness. There was a moment of darkness, and then Chardur entered the room and snapped a switch.

I've told it just the way it happened, or just the way I thought it happened there in the darkness with the distraction of phantom shape, phantom voice, and the final moment of madness to blot out all reasonable remembrance.

I've told it just the way I told it to the police, and nothing anyone else can say has added to the story. Mrs. Brewster knows no more, Mrs. Prinn cannot explain.

The police do not wish to believe that the seance was genuine. The police do not wish to believe in the existence of an Indian Spirit Guide. But there is nothing else to account for what happened—for that final ghastly sound which I identify as a war-whoop, and for what we saw when the lights went on. . . .

Yes, the lights went on and I saw Orlando Crown sitting in his chair once more. I stared at his head, which was like a bucket of blood and brains that had overflowed.

Maybe there is an Indian Spirit Guide and maybe there isn't. But as I stared at the red ruin of Orlando Crown's head, I believed at last.

For Orlando Crown had been scalped!

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Heading by Lee Brown Coye

Blessed Are the Meek

BY STEPHEN GRENDON

WITHOUT lifting his eyes to see, Grandpa Cowell knew that Mrs. Hassell watched him where he walked in the park with his grandson, who was her stepson. And he knew what she would be saying to Mrs. Krenet from next door. "He fills that child's head with stupid fairly tales. All day long. Something will have to be done about it." He had heard her going on like that on the telephone, and no doubt she did it elsewhere. If only Ralph had not married her after his first wife's death! And, since he had done so, if only he had remained alive to control his household!

Kenneth pulled at his hand, and he looked into the boy's wide blue eyes. "Grampa, what are those?" He pointed into the fountain pool.

"Those are goldfish, Kennie."

"What are goldfish, Grampa?"

"Goldfish are carp." Somehow, this did not sound adequate. He went on. "Goldfish are really carp, but down underneath once upon a time they were something else. They were just carp like all the other carp, but one day they got together and they decided they didn't like being like all the others. They wanted to be a special kind of carp. So they asked God to change them somehow and make them different. God said he would, but if he gave them beautiful colors, he'd make them smaller. That was God's way of evening things up, and he did it. That's how come goldfish are so pretty to look at, but their big cousins, the carps, are homely."

Kenneth looked longingly at the goldfish,

"A djinn is something like a big overgrown boy who doesn't behave."

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trying to imagine them asking God to change their colors. "Wish I was a goldfish," he said. "Then I could swim underwater all day."

"But then you couldn't walk, and you wouldn't like that, would you, Kennie?"

"No, Grampa."

"Now then, who wants to be a goldfish and have people looking at you all day?"

"I guess I don't, Grampa."

"We'd better go home, Kennie."

"Aw, do we have to?"

"I guess we do."

Kenneth was reluctant, but the old man was firm. Grandpa Cowell whirled his cane several times, harrumphed twice, and set off. Kenneth pulled back. Grandpa Cowell let go his hand and said cheerfully, "Well, goodbye then, Kennie!" and went off alone.

"You wait for me, Grampa!" cried Kenneth in shrill alarm, and ran after him.

They walked across the park and the street to the house. Mrs. Hassell stood waiting, her hard, sharp eyes peering at them from between narrowed lids, her thin-lipped mouth an uncompromising slit.

"You're late, Mr. Cowell."

"Are we, Harriet?"

"You know you are. You're always late. If you're too lazy to take out your watch and look at it, then you're ready for a 'home.' "

"Well, I'm sorry, Harriet."

"Oh, yes, you're sorry," she mocked him and strode off ahead of him, without a glance for the boy. Her mumbled words came floating back, "Filling his head full of nonsense! What would Ralph think, I wonder! Or his mother, either, if she were alive!"

Kenneth tugged at Grandpa Cowell's hand, indicating that he should bend down. Grandpa Cowell obligingly did so. Kenneth seized his ear and whispered.

"I don't like her," he said vehemently.

"Tch, tch!" clucked Grandpa Cowell.

AFTER Kenneth had been put to bed, Grandpa Cowell sat alone, waiting.

Every night the old man waited. He had come to know what to expect. There would be a few minutes of blessed peace, while the twilight explored the park across the street, and Mrs. Hassell gave directions for tomorrow's meals to the cook in the kitchen; then Mrs. Hassell would come in and begin to talk. It was almost always the same, and tonight she came earlier than usual.

"Grandpa Cowell, what kind of rigmarole did you tell him today?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all," he said meekly. It was no good fighting in a household; that made for bitterness and lifelong enmity, and even if he did not live entirely on her charity, he was in a sense dependent upon her to be near Kenneth.

"You'll just have to stop it, do you hear? What's to become of that boy?"

"I do my best to teach him things," he said quietly.

"Ha! and what things! Indeed!" She scoffed. "And what do you intend to do with him tomorrow when I have my Club?"

"I thought, if you wouldn't mind, we'd walk down to the seashore."

"Mind? Of course I mind, but what can I do about it?"

Nag, he said in his mind's channels. Nag and scold. He retreated to the Bible, reading wherever he chanced to open the book. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," he read. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall possess the land. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after justice, for they shall have their fill. . . ."

BRIGHT and early next morning, Grandpa Cowell and Kenneth left the house, carrying their lunch. They took a street-car and rode for blocks and blocks, until they came to where they could walk down to the seashore. It was a warm day, but not hot; a breeze blew in off the ocean, the water was cobalt, and the air that came in was fresh. It was a wonderful day for an outing, and Kenneth was in high spirits.

By noon the old man was almost exhausted. Though he was neither too old nor physically decayed, he was past the age at which he could readily work; but he was no longer so hale that he could easily withstand the tempestuous demands made upon him by a five-year-old. He was grateful for the chance to sit down in the shade back from the water's edge and eat the lunch they had brought.

For Kenneth, however, there was no rest.

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He was finished long before Grandpa Cowell, and was off to the water's edge again, running along it like the wind. The old man watched him anxiously. Now and then the boy stopped and picked up something, examined it, threw it away, but at last he found something that seized hold of his fancy, and came running back with it, thrusting it at the old man.

"Grampa, what's this?"

Grandpa Cowell took it and looked at it judiciously. It was a curiously-wrought bottle of dark green glass, quite opaque, with some kind of script worked into the glass. It looked Arabic. It had a heavy silver seal. From its appearance, it must have floated in, neck down; so it must be empty, for the seal would not otherwise have overbalanced a filled bottle. It was beautiful in the sunlight, giving off an irridescent sheen.

"What is it, Grampa?"

"Sitdown, Kennie," said Grandpa Cowell gravely. "This is a wonderful bottle," he continued. "This is a bottle from far, far away, and I think it's got a djinn in it."

"What's a djinn?"

"A djinn is something like a big overgrown boy who doesn't behave. So when they catch him, a magician makes him small and puts him into this bottle, and there he has to stay until somebody lets him out. And when he's let out, he gives a wish to the one who lets him out."

Kenneth looked dubiously at the bottle. "He isn't very heavy, is he?"

"Oh, no. When he's been in the bottle for a while, he gets as light as smoke. In fact, he looks just like a puff of smoke."

"He does?" He peered wide-eyed at the bottle. "But I don't see any smoke in there, Grampa."

"I know. You can't see anything. The glass can't be looked through. That's so nobody will open it and let him out."

"Was he real bad?"

"Oh, very bad! He certainly was."

"Was he as big as me, Grampa?"

"Maybe he was. But thinner, I suspect."

Kenneth was enchanted. He kept the bottle with him all afternoon and clung

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tenaciously to it all the way home on the street-car. He burst into the house with it, eager to show it to his stepmother.

"See! See, Mama, what I got!"

"Where did you get that?"

"Out of the ocean."

"Well, throw it away. Your grandfather ought to know better than to let you lug home stuff like that." She glared accusingly at the old man, who smiled shyly.

He hugged it to his breast, crying, "No, no!"

"You'll do as I say, Kenneth!" She bore down upon him, her mouth working, but the old man interposed himself.

"Now, now, we can do that tomorrow. I promised him we'd open it. Then we can throw it away, can't we, Kennie?"

"Open it first?" asked Kenneth dubiously.

"Tomorrow morning, yes, sir!"

Mrs. Hassell stood angrily gazing at him. "Two people can't raise that child, Mr. Cowell."

"Some children need a man as well as a woman," he said mildly.

THAT night Grandpa Cowell did not know half the time whether he slept or woke. He had waited before going to bed until Kenneth was sound asleep; then he had gone into the boy's room and taken the bottle from him, lest Mrs. Hassell take it and destroy it in the night. He put it safely under his pillow, but somehow it made an unpleasant unevenness under his head, and he was a long time getting to sleep.

Then, at the edge of sleep, he was awakened by an imperative voice crying out, "Sir!"

He sat up, mumbling and rubbing his head, yawned once or twice, and stretched out again. He closed his eyes.

"Sir!" he heard again.

This time he did not stir. After all, there were all manner of sounds in the night. Street-cars clanged past, once a fire-truck went by, sirens screaming, cars went up and down, and not too far away the elevated trains roared through from the suburbs. He counted sheep, but very soon it was not sheep but strange little dark-skinned men, glaring angrily at him over the stile they were crossing, gaunt, hungry-looking creatures. After a while they were not men at all, but only being in the shape of men, all looking alike as peas in a pod. He counted one hundred and seventy-one of them, identical even to the loin-cloth and turbans they wore. It was curious, he thought drowsily, how all of them wished earnestly to speak to him, for each of them addressed him with a peremptory "Sir!" as he crossed the stile.

The little dark man was omnipresent, and his commanding "Sir!" rang in his ears.

But he slept. Or did he sleep, indeed? For there was that little dark man peering at him through a thick green wall and demanding his freedom. "Let me out, and you shall have your wish!" he said, over and over. And then again, "Sir! Free me; I will make you rich; I will make you happy. Let me out!"

Grandpa Cowell woke up, rubbing his head. He sighed, reached under his pillow, and put the green bottle from the sea under his bed, and groaning, lay down once more.

This time there was no doubt about it—he could sleep; he was confident of it. The little dark man was there still, but he was far away, much farther, and his imperative "Sir!" was just a whisper on the edge of his consciousness. There was still, however, an illusion in his mind's eye, showing the little dark man once small, once large and billowing as a cloud, with a turban and a sword, with anger flashing in his eyes. But this passed, and the cuckoo clock downstairs said two o'clock pipingly, and Grandpa Cowell slept, rueing the tale told Kenneth.

BEFORE she left for a shopping trip along Fifth Avenue next morning, Mrs. Hassell delivered her ultimatum to Grandpa Cowell. "If that bottle isn't out of this house and out of that child's life when I come home, I'll have something to say to you. Djinn, indeed! He told me all about it last night. You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Grandpa Cowell looked at Kenneth as if he had betrayed him.

Kenneth was blissfully unaware of the old man's hurt, since he had discovered his precious bottle still in his bed, where the old man had put it on rising, and now looked forward to its opening.

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"Now, Grampa, now!" he begged.

"Not till after breakfast. Eat your cereal!"

"I don't like that old cereal."

"You just eat it. There's lots of things we don't like, but we'd better eat them just the same. It's good for you."

Kenneth obeyed, lured by the magic of the bottle.

After breakfast they sat down together on the back porch where the ash tree offered shade from the sun's heat, the bottle between them.

"We have to make a wish," said Grandpa Cowell.

"You make it, Grampa."

"What would you like, Kennie? It's your bottle. You found it."

Kenneth danced up and down. "Hurry up and open it, Grampa. You wish."

"What shall I wish?" He worked at the bottle. "Hurry up and tell me, because we have to make the wish right after we open the bottle."

"I know, Grampa. Wish for him to take Mama away."

Grandpa Cowell smiled benignly. "All right, Kennie. That's just what we'll do. Of course, we won't ever know, because she'll probably be back in time for supper, when she said she would come."

"No, no—for good. Wish it for good!"

The bottle came open at last. As he withdrew the leaden cork, a puff of dust billowed out and curled over the neck of the bottle.

"There! There he is!" screamed Kenneth, excitedly. "Hurry up, Grampa, or he'll get away."

"I wish the djinn would take Mrs. Hassell far away and never let her come back again," said Grandpa Cowell gravely. "So there, that's done!" he added, with a twinkle in his eyes.

The dust rose high up, flattened into a cloud, and vanished in the wind still blowing off the ocean.

"And now, Grampa," said Kenneth solemnly, taking up the bottle, "we'll have a funeral for the bottle. You be the preacher, and I'll be the burier."

"All right," said Grandpa Cowell cheerfully.

"You lead the way. That's what the preacher always has to do!"

Grandpa Cowell folded his hands and marched down the steps of the porch for all the world like a minister about to conduct services for the departed.

MRS. HASSELL never did come home. The supper hour came and went, and there was no Mrs. Hassell. Kenneth's bedtime came, and still no Mrs. Hassell. By morning, Grandpa Cowell called the police, and they asked a lot of questions.

If Grandpa Cowell has subscribed to the *World*, he might have seen a curious story about the arrest of one Herbert Minshall, who had at first been charged with intoxication, but had subsequently been released for lack of evidence. He had belabored a policeman on upper Fifth with an hysterical tale of seeing a woman whisked up off the street in a cloud of dust or smoke, and carried right on out of the canyon of Fifth Avenue into the blue, dwindling to a speck in heaven, and finally to nothing. "What an imagination!" said a hundred thousand readers of the *World*. "Herbert Minshall, hysteric," said the polic blotter. "Discharged for lack of evidence to sustain charge of intoxication. Probably schizophrenic."

Grandpa Cowell was puzzled for a long time, but eventually he recovered sufficiently to take pleasure in his new-found freedom, particularly since it became increasingly evident day after day that Mrs. Hassell, wherever she was, had no intention of coming home, and since he had tired quickly of making the rounds of hospitals and morgues to look at unidentified women in their middle thirties.

As for Kenneth, he could not understand Grandpa Cowell's perplexity. He knew very well what had happened to his stepmother. In his own small primitive way, he celebrated the even by disinterring the green bottle, setting it up on his bureau, and making daily offerings to it, in sincere tribute.

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Incident at the Galloping Horse

BY CARL JACOBI

A horse, a beautiful woman and a fated ride that had no return

THERE is a curiously unreal quality to Caribbean moonlight. Standing that night on the little deck of the *Mariegalante,* I could see the waves creaming on Tortola's beach, the bearded cabbage palms, and the road stretching white and lonely across the island—the road that had been old when Morgan sailed these seas.

From below, up the open companionway, drifted voices and the strains of Mendelssohn's *Ruy Blas,* one of Dolph Prescott's favorite selections. It was a paradox of the man's character that was hard to understand. The wealthy yacht-owner was indeed a strange mixture of artistic niceties and gross habits and opinions.

Presently Prescott appeared, climbing to the deck: a large, heavy man in white waistcoat with coarse colorless hair and a bristly mustache. He was followed by his wife, Claire, slender, violet-eyed, clad in an emerald evening dress.

"Hullo, Frank," he said. "You here all by yourself? Claire's got some errant idea of going ashore. See if you can change her mind."

I lit my pipe. "It might be better to wait until morning."

"Nonsense!" Claire Prescott laughed. "There's nothing on this side of the island but the ruins of that tavern, and I want to see it. Family pride, y'know."

All day she had talked of that old tavern. Dating to the seventeenth century, built of stone, it had stood here on Tortola's eastern shore, deserted and forgotten, simply another crumbling relic of the Indies. It bore the curious name, *The Inn of the Galloping Horse,* and since Tortola was one of the British Virgins, off the beaten tourist

Heading by Lee Coye Brown

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track, it had gone virtually unmentioned in histories and travel volumes. Yet legend had it that Brasiliano, Bartolomew Portugee, L'Ollinois, Morgan, and other nefarious buccaneers had all diced and drunk in its common room and slept in its beds. Somewhere Claire Prescott had come upon an old diary, and through it claimed she was able to trace her ancestry back to one of the early tavern owners.

"Have the gig lowered, Dolph," Claire said stubbornly. "I'll go down and change and see if Mark wants to go."

We were four and a crew aboard the *Mariegalante*. Besides the Prescotts and myself, there was young Mark Lockridge who was writing and gathering atmosphere for a new novel, two predecessors of which had been quite successful.

Leaving Santiago, we had come leisurely down the "bow of Ulysses," with stops at Kingston, Port au Prince, and Ciudad Trujillo; then through the Mona Passage to San Juan. But it was the out-of-the-way ports of the Lesser Antilles in which Prescott was interested, and so the *Mariegalante* had swung north by east for a brief stay at Spanish Town in Virgin Gorda. Then at Claire's insistence and in spite of the vague warnings of the Spanish Town Negro harbormaster, we had headed across the Drake Channel to our present anchorage at Tortola.

"Ef'n you go to Tortola," the Negro said, "be sure to sail south and land at Roadtown. Keep away from the eastern side and that old tavern there."

"But it's the tavern we want to see," Claire Prescott had protested.

The aged black had shaken his wooly head. "Nothin' left of that old tavern but some piles of stone," he said earnestly. "Christopher Marlet went over there a year ago, just being curious. Christopher don't talk much, but he ain't been right since." And he tapped his head knowingly.

As I stood there on the moonlit deck, watching the sailors work at the falls, preparatory to lowering the gig, the island looked calm and peaceful like a picture post-card viewed through dark-colored glasses. Towering up in the background was the black bulk of Mount Sage. The road leading gently up the slope looked somewhat forbidding. It was easy to picture a party of roistering buccaneers staggering down it, singing a ribald song.

At close range the beach wasn't as attractive as it had appeared from the yacht. There were treacherous coral reefs over which the water ripped and snarled and dashed back at us in a fan of spray. Presently, however, the gig grated to a landing, and the four of us, Dolph and Claire Prescott—in slacks now—Lockridge and myself, were pushing our way through the undergrowth to the cliff.

The cliff was steep at one point; farther on it dwindled to a low rise. A hundred yards beyond we came upon the road. The road simply began out of nowhere and swept smooth and even in a gentle curve, apparently bisecting the island. At first glance there was no sign of habitation of any kind; then after we had walked a short distance, the low ruins of a building loomed ahead in the shadow of the palmites.

"It's the tavern," Claire said excitedly. "Think of it, Mark. More than two hundred and fifty years. What stories this place could tell." And she linked her arm in young Lockridge's in a manner that brought a frown to Dolph Prescott's lips. Ever since the *Mariegalante* had cleared Jamaica, this infatuation on the part of Claire for the novelist had grown openly. It was clear that jealousy was beginning to eat into Prescott.

We came abreast of the tavern. Two walls and a part of a third were standing, the one facing the road having the rectanglar opening of a doorway and an eyelike window embrasure on each side, the whole unpleasantly suggesting the face of some monstrous animal crouching there silently before us. All about were piles of crumbled masonry interspersed with clumps of yellow grass.

The tower, some twenty yards to the rear, seemed in a better state of preservation. Leaving the others to search for possible relics, I crossed the intervening space and looked for an opening in the weathered walls. There was none in evidence, but a series of steps cut deep into the stonework led in a circular fashion up to the top. I saw now what was obvious: that the tower, commanding a clear view of the Drake Channel,

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had served as a watchpost for passing buccaneers.

I swung up to the lower step and began to climb carefully, pressing close to the tower wall. Ten minutes later, after considerable exertion, I emerged on the top platform and saw that a man-high parapet encircled it. There were, however, a number of niches in the wall, all of them slightly rounded, apparently rests for a telescope. I strode to the seaward side and peered through one of them. The side walls of the slot were beveled and made to slant first in, then out, from a common center. A lining of an odd kind of stone had been mortised around it, a kind of porphry that caught the moonlight and glittered dully. As I looked, it seemed that the view was magnified several times. Below me stretched the shimmering Caribbean, and there at anchor rode the dainty *Mariegalante.*

I crossed to the opposite side of the tower. Again I was struck by a strange, unreal clarity. I could see far down the deserted white road. Under the indigo glory of the heavens every tree, rock and shrub stood out with stereoscopic clarity. .

For some moments I stood there at gaze. Then I saw it!

ALMOST at the limit of my vision, racing toward me down the sweep of the road, came a powerful white horse and rider. It approached at a full gallop, and the girl clinging to the animal's saddleless back—for it was a girl—pulled frantically at a single rein, apparently without the slightest effect. Her undone hair streamed behind her in the wind; her gray riding cloak whipped and billowed wildly.

Now they were almost beneath me, and while a strange haze seemed to blur my vision, I could see the fear that contorted the girl's face. Her lips were clamped shut, and blood welled at the corners where her teeth had cut into them. The nostrils of the horse were dilated, its eyes glazed. It seemed to be expending every effort to increase the distance between itself and some unseen horror behind.

They passed out of sight beyond the tower. I leaped across to the niche on the opposite wall, in time to see the horse leave the road and dash toward higher ground to the left. Up, up the frantic beast climbed, skirting rocks and thickets like some guided juggernaut. It reached the brink of the cliff, seemed to poise there motionless for a single heartbeat. Then to my horror it leaped and plunged down into the sea.

The spell was broken then, and I rushed to the tower stairs, but I still had sufficient presence of mind to descend with caution, the way down being infinitely more difficult and treacherous than the ascent. But when I reached the ruins of the tavern I drew up in amazement. There, Claire Prescott was laughing idly while Lockridge related some absurd episode of the day. Five feet away Dolph poked unconcernedly amid the rubble with a short stick. All three turned sharply as they heard my exclamation.

"That girl . . . !" I cried. "Didn't you see her?"

Claire stared, then broke into a smile. "Don't tell me there's a princess imprisoned in the tower."

"But you must have seen her. The horse went straight down the road."

"Now it's a horse," grinned Lockridge. "I told you this place was haunted."

I fought back my anger and explained what I had seen. Or thought I had seen. Now I wasn't so sure. And my uncertainty was made even more patent as the three of them sought to discredit my story.

"You say you heard no hoofbeats?" Lockridge smiled urbanely.

"I said I wasn't aware of any. But I saw that horse and rider—a girl—gallop down the road and plunge over the cliff. Good Lord, man, I'd scarcely imagine a thing like that. Not at my age."

Lockridge could be unpleasant when he chose. "There's always self-hypnosis . . . auto-suggestion, Doctor Kennedy," he said. "And you did have a number of cocktails before coming out here."

I let it go at that. Perplexed, I walked slowly back down the road, studying its surface carefully. There was no sign of hoof marks. Nor did the soft loam of the cliff betray any sign of the animal's passage. And when I reached the summit and looked down into the dark water, I saw no floating object of any kind.

Back on the *Mariegalante,* I went to my cabin and brooded a half hour or so over a

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tasteless pipe. Auto-suggestion, Lockridge had said. And yet I had heard nothing beyond the tavern's name and the vague warnings of the Spanish Town harbormaster which would induce such a state of mind.

Dolph Prescott had in his cabin several good books on the Indies, and it occurred to me that one of them I had overlooked might possibly contain some mention of the tavern and that strange tower. I put on a dressing robe, entered the passageway and drew up short. At the far end of the corridor where but a single night light burned now, Claire Prescott was in Mark Lockridge's arms. Embarrassed, I withdrew into my room, waited a moment, then rattled the latch loudly and stepped out again. As I did so, the door of Lockridge's room closed, and Claire Prescott came pacing down the passage toward me. She nodded and looked at me curiously.

"I want to see Dolph," I explained. "He has some books I'd like to borrow."

In the Prescott cabin the atmosphere was strained. Dolph's face was tense, and I got the impression he was controlling his emotions only during my presence. I found a book on the shelf—it was Hardy's *Caribbean Primitives*—and left as quickly as I politely could. Even as I closed the door behind me, I heard Dolph's voice, low but pulsing with anger.

"Well, my dear, just how far is this going to go?"

Back in my own cabin, I tried to thrust aside all thoughts of this unpleasant triangle that had developed aboard the yacht and thumbed nervously through the book.

I found but a brief mention of Tortola:

> Although the people of the Virgins and the Lesser Antilles were Caribs and a different race from the Arawaks of the larger islands, there is evidence that some of them too originated from the Mayans in Yucatan. Traces have been found on Tortola of a degenerate form of worship, obscure sacrifices to the horrible feathered serpent god, Kukulcan, or as he was called farther south, Huitzilopochtli, and other frightful forms of demonology.

I WENT to bed at length and slept fitfully. Morning, and I entered the tiny salon to find two of the passengers missing. Dolph Prescott, brooding alone over his coffee, informed me sullenly that Claire and Mark Lockridge had gone ashore again "to inspect the tavern in daylight." It was with difficulty that the yacht-owner kept his emotions under control.

As the hours passed and his wife did not return, he grew more and more irritable. We went up on deck, and from time to time he sent his gaze shoreward, but there was no sign of familiar figures on the beach to call for the gig's return.

Then at a little before noon they finally did appear, and even at that distance there was evidence that both Lockridge and Claire were distraught over something. When they came aboard, Claire's steps were faltering and her face was white.

"I saw it!" were her first words. "You weren't imagining things, Doctor Kennedy. I saw the girl and the white horse . . . saw them both plunge over the cliff. In heaven's name, what spell hangs over this place?"

She slumped limply into a canvas deck chair and ran her kerchief over her face. In a strained voice she explained what had happened on shore. She and Mark Lockridge had spent some time around the tavern without finding anything of interest. But when it came to climbing the tower, Mark had complained that heights made him dizzy. She had therefore mounted the stone steps alone. Reaching the top platform, she had experienced an odd feeling of detachment, as if she were both on the ground below and there on the height at the same time. From then on, much the same had happened to her as had happened to me. She had looked through the niche in the parapet, had noticed the strange clarity or magnification of the view below, and finally had seen the horse and girl rider.

"It was horrible," Claire said. "That poor girl, riding as if she were possessed . . . as if some demon pursued her."

It was easy to see that Dolph Prescott put little stock in this narration, but attributed it to a clever screen contrived by his wife to divert attention from her long stay ashore. For politeness' sake, however, he did ask a few questions. Then Lockridge took up the subject.

"I suppose you could say that a psychic residue of some event of the past still exists

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there on the island. You could say that if you were a spiritist. But I'm not a spiritist."

"I think I shall take a look at that tavern again myself this afternoon," Dolph said. "Frank, you'll go with me."

I CONFESS my nerves were on edge when at two bells Prescott and I left the *Mariegalante* and were rowed ashore. Once again we picked our way across the boulder-strewn strip of sand, climbed the low cliff and found ourselves on the road. The island in the daylight appeared strangely unreal. The air was utterly still; not a bird or an insect broke the heavy silence.

We came at length to the ruins of the tavern and began to climb the tower silently. The two of us were bathed in perspiration by the time we reached the top. But, as I had expected, I saw nothing unusual through the niches in the wall. Moreover, the effect of magnification which had been apparent before was now absent. Prescott showed but little interest. His eyes were bloodshot; from time to time he glanced at his watch and then down to where the *Mariegalante* rode at anchor. I realized that I must steer his mind into other channels.

"That settlement on the other side of the island . . . Roadtown, I believe it's called. Perhaps they know more of the tower's origin there. Care to hike it?"

He assented dully. We descended the tower and in spite of the blazing sun set off at a brisk pace. It was the better part of two hours before we swung down a last hillock and entered the sprawling village of Roadtown.

Spanish-style, it consisted of a collection of clapboard huts, flanked at one end by a church and at the other by a stone fort overlooking the mile-long harbor.

There were few shops and few white residents. An old negro woman with a gay-colored kerchief tied about her head answered our greetings and talked a bit about the island. But when I brought up the subject of the tavern, she put a clay pipe in her mouth and pretended to go to sleep, though I saw she was watching us through half veiled eyes. In the single pub which the town boasted, the barkeeper viewed us with suspicion as he stood polishing his glasses. No, he knew nothing about the other side of the island. His business was here in Roadtown.

We continued through the village. Dozing in the shade of the church wall was a white-haired patriarch of a man who appeared bright and alert in spite of his age. He nodded as we approached.

"How long have I been on Tortola?" he repeated. "A long time, *Senhor,* a very long time."

I put the question point blank. "There's an inn on the other side of the island known as the *Galloping Horse,*" I said. "What do you know about it?"

The Portuguese' bright little eyes blinked. He slid a Cuban cigarette between his lips and lit it with a match scratched on his belt buckle.

"I know all about it, *Senhor,*" he said. "I know . . . but then you are not interested in legends."

"Legends are exactly what we are interested in."

He hesitated. "The place is very old, *Senhor.* It was once visited by Morgan and again by that cruel French buccaneer, L'Ollinois. It is said that it was built as a cache for treasure stolen from the Spanish flota ships by Pierre le Grand."

"You spoke of legends," I broke in. "Have you ever heard anything of a galloping horse and a girl rider as apparently seen from the top platform of the lookout tower near the tavern?"

The cigarette slipped from his lips as a gleam entered his eyes.

"Have you?" I insisted.

HE RAN a tongue over toothless gums. Quietly I took out my wallet and drew forth several bills of American currency. The Portugee accepted the money with feigned reluctance.

"I can tell you but little, *Senhor.* Only snatches of a story that has been handed down from one islander to another. During the time the Frenchman, L'Ollinois, stayed at the tavern, the innkeeper was a man by the name of Besalt. He had a wife, a wild young thing who was forever making eyes at the guests, and once she had seen L'Ollinois, she fell head over heels in love with him.

Now Besalt recognized the buccaneer

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for what he was. He warned his wife to have nothing to do with him.

"But as the woman continued her flirtation, Besalt became almost mad with jealousy. There was a band of Indios on the island at the time who were worshippers of a serpent god. It was said that they practiced horrible sacrifices before an image which stood not far from the tavern. Besalt suspected this to be the trysting place of his wife and L'Ollinois, and he got one of the Indios to help him frighten her. She was a simple girl, and he thought that if he could put the fear of Satan in her, he would have little trouble with her love affairs in the future.

"I don't know what the Indio did. I do know that he gave Besalt pieces of a strange kind of stone and told him to place it around a window or high place where he could look upon his wife as she returned to the tavern. He also gave him some queer markings to copy and a few words of Indian gibberish to commit to memory.

"On a night when the moon was at the full, Besalt's wife took one of the tavern horses and rode off. A half hour before L'Ollinois had gone the same way. Besalt climbed the tower and placed the stone given him by the Indio in each of the telescope slots there. He didn't have much interest in this heathen flummery, but he agreed to follow instructions.

Besalt had not long to wait. He looked through the telescope niche and saw the horse bearing his wife come galloping down the road. He saw that she was frightened. And then he saw that both she and the horse were all but overwhelmed by a nameless horror. The horse left the road and climbed to the cliff edge. But not until it reached the brink did he realize what was happening. Then it was too late."

With these words the old man ceased talking abruptly.

"What happened to L'Ollinois?" I said.

The Portugee shook his head. "That's a matter of question," he said. "He left Tortola unharmed, but some say that after that he was hopelessly mad and that his madness was responsible for his murder later on the mainland."

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"Go on," I prompted.

He stood in silence, then reached into his pocket and drew forth a dirty roll of leather. "Perhaps the *Senhor* would be interested in seeing an Indio charm made of the same kind of stone Besalt used in the telescope niches. Look, *Senhor*. It is very rare."

I looked upon the flat stone disc, and my interest in the man's story faded. So the whole thing was another tourists' come-on. Doubtless the Portugee kept a supply of these charms to be sold to any gullible listener.

But Prescott took the charm and turned it over and over in his hands.

"How much?" he said quietly.

THE day was now well spent, and it was time to think of returning to the yacht. As we headed down the road I glanced at Prescott. Either the Portugee's story had made a great impression on him or he was still worrying about his wife, for his eyes stared into space and his jaw was set hard.

The sun was descending in the west, and shadows began to lengthen across the road. But the air was still stifling, and perspiration stood out on our faces as we paced down the back trail. We were nearing the tavern when suddenly Prescott drew up short and stood staring off to his left.

"What's wrong?" I said.

And then I *felt* it. An invisible aura radiated out of the jungle and descended upon us. As a medical man with a professional skepticism, I am aware how absurd such a statement sounds. But skepticism or no, the feeling was there, a malignant miasma that swept across the road like an under-current of evil.

"There's something in there," Prescott said.

Together we plunged into the underbrush and began to fight our way forward. For a dozen yards or more it was island jungle at its worst. Then I sensed a subtle change in the foliage. The brambles and thickets gave way to short grass, yellow and under-nourished from lack of sunlight, and this in turn changed to a flinty topsoil, barren of vegetation of any kind. It was as if we were advancing on unhallowed ground which all life avoided. Only the trees continued, but now they arranged themselves in strange arboreal corridors and galleries, winding before us, ever leading us farther from the road.

Suddenly the corridor widened, and I saw far ahead an open glade, like the nave of a cathedral. The dying daylight was feeble here, the shadows confusing, but there was a thing of movement in the center of that glade. At first I took it to be a mass of whitish *chapla* vines stirring gently in the wind. But there was no wind, and as we went on, a figure evolved in the gloom ahead.

Prescott came to a halt. "In heaven's name, what's that?"

How much I witnessed at that instant and how much my inner eye supplemented in the after glow I do not know. For there was a glow, a violent radiance that swept from one side of the glade to the other. It might have been a last penetrating ray of the descending sun, but it not prevent me from seeing for a full instant that figure in all its diabolic horror.

A huge figure of incredible stature and coffee-colored features, it held in one hand an elliptic shield, in the other, a blue spear. A pointed feathered headdress surmounted its skull, and its naked limbs were mottled with splotches of blue pigment. On either side of the head and near each foot writhed a serpent.

Then it was gone, and Prescott and I paced slowly forward. We entered the glade and stared in disbelief. There was no living creature in evidence; only a crumbling stone platform stood there, its surface covered with carven hieroglyphics. Prescott bent down and began examining these markings. He took out a little leather-bound notebook and copied them carefully. He drew from his pocket the charm sold him by the Roadtown Portugee and compared the symbols on it with those on the dias. Then, using his pocket knife he began to chip free a small section of the stone.

"It's Kukulcan all right," he said. "There was an image to him here long ago. Kennedy, did you see what I saw?"

"A mirage of some sort," I suggested feebly. "They're common in the tropics, you know."

"Mirage?" he repeated slowly. "Not here. Not here in the jungle."

I looked at the stone he had broken away

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from the dais, and I saw that it was the same lustrous kind of porphry that had been used to fashion the Portugee's charm . . . the same material that had been mortised in the telescope slots of the lookout tower.

PRESCOTT and I returned to the *Marie-galante* just as the yacht's chronometer was striking eight bells. On deck Lockridge and Claire were waiting for us. I saw Dolph glance at the younger man and then at his wife sharply, but he said nothing.

That night, as if by common agreement, conversation was strained, and when a sullen thunderstorm swept out over Mount Sage, the little dining salon became a place of gloom, which not even the brilliant electric lights could dispel. Then an hour later the clouds were swept away, and the moon rode high and clear. Once again the island was bathed in that blue light.

Strangely enough, it was I who suggested we go ashore again, though Prescott agreed at once. The strange story told by the Roadtown patriarch, the attitude of the village folk—I carefully forced aside all thought of our strange experience in the jungle—had instilled in me an urge to see the island again.

The gig made an uneventful trip to the beach. The roadway was full of pot holes of muddy water, and Claire and Lockridge, more agile, gradually increased their lead and were soon lost to view. Over the dinner table Prescott had briefly described the strange dais, though he had avoided all mention of the vision he had seen. When I turned to speak of this now, I saw Dolph too was striding ahead rapidly. I was therefore alone when I reached the tavern, and in the ancient courtyard I saw no signs of the others.

Slowly I crossed to the tower and climbed the circular steps. Emerging on the top platform, I found the yacht owner standing before one of the parapet niches, a pair of night glasses to his eyes. The man's face might have been chiseled out of stone; all save his lips which were trembling convulsively.

Silently he turned and handed me the glasses. I saw nothing at first. Then midway down the road a pair of figures focused themselves in the lens. They were Claire and young Lockridge, standing in the shadow of a flanking cabbage palm, and they were oblivious to all else, locked in each other's arms.

Dolph Prescott leaned weakly against the wall; abruptly he roused himself and took off his coat, though the air was still chill from the recent storm. With his hands he began to clear the debris away from the center space of the platform floor.

I stood there in the moonlight, watching him. He worked with a strange grim intent. When he had cleared away a section roughly six feet square, he took from his pocket a piece of chalk and slowly and carefully began to trace a design there on the platform floor.

THERE was something weird in the scene, and I felt a strange thrill of excitement as I saw that he was copying detail for detail the hieroglyphs from the Kukulcan dais.

The work completed, he suddenly became aware of me. "Frank," he said, "I seem to have lost my notebook. I had it with me when I left the ship, I'm sure. Would you mind going down and looking for it for me? It probably slipped from my pocket somewhere in the courtyard."

"Notebook?" I repeated stupidly.

He nodded. "Yes. A little leather-bound book. Will you, please?"

I shrugged and headed for the staircase. Descending carefully in the half gloom. I let my thought run wild. What was Prescott up to? What was the significance of all his actions there on the tower platform?

Once the ancient masonry crumbled beneath my feet and threatened to pitch me headlong; I threw my weight backward and to the side just in time. I had reached the bottom step when a sudden thought struck me. I turned and hurried up the steps.

As I emerged on the platform I saw Prescott kneeling in supplication before his chalked design. In front of him he had placed two objects: the piece of stone he had chiseled from the dais in the jungle glade and the Indio charm given him by the Roadtown Portugee. And as he knelt there he began to chant a low incantation. Strange words and syllables flowed from his lips as he stretched his arms outward.

When finally he rose and turned to me, his voice was dry and hard.

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"You think I'm mad, Frank? Well, you wouldn't, if you had studied camparative religions as I have; if you had gone into the philosophical thought processes of these ancient Mayas. The temples of Kukulcan, before the time of the conquistadores were large and imposing, and the people prospered."

There was no doubt about it, in his present state, the man was definitely psychotic. His eyes were contracted, his face, ashen, He took the night glasses again and looked through them.

"They're going to the dais," he said huskily. "I knew they would. Damn their souls!"

Drawn by an irresistible lure, my gaze turned to the nearest niche in the parapet. Below me the white lonely road was etched in sharp relief by the bright moonlight. Below me was desertion, with no sign of movement save the tops of the palmistes waving in the night wind. A deep hush seemed to have fallen over the island.

And then, knifing through the stillness, a sound transfixed me. It was a woman's scream, and it voiced agony and terror. With the sounding of that cry the strange effect of magnification of the scene viewed through the parapet niche returned tenfold, and the white road leaped forward to meet my eyes.

Far off where that road blurred into the moonlit haze of distance a white shadow had appeared. The shadow grew, took on proportion and form. Now it was racing toward me at incredible speed. I felt my pulse begin to pound as I saw that it was a horse, a huge white horse with a woman rider. At a pounding gallop the horse swept down the curve of the road and swung into the straightaway. The woman on its saddleless back clutched the animal's mane, and her disheveled dress whipped and billowed out behind her. Her eyes were wide with terror.

Now they were passing out of sight beyond the tower wall. But in that instant before I found myself compelled to leap across to the niche on the opposite parapet, I looked back down the road. And I saw . . .

Was it a shadow caused by a fleeting cloud over the face of the moon? Or was it, as every instinct told me, a monstrous naked figure, mottled with splotches of blue, arms extended, holding two writhing serpents, advancing down that road in slow but gigantic and relentless strides?

Then it too was gone, and I leaped across to a niche on the opposite side of the parapet. Straight down the roadway the horse was galloping, but now suddenly it veered off to the left and began to climb up toward higher ground. With a grim fascination I watched it circle thickets and boulders, mount higher and higher toward the cliff edge. It reached it, and the woman turned and cast a last frantic look over her shoulder. For a fleeting instant I saw her face—black hair and terror-stricken eyes. . . *The woman was Claire Prescott!*

Then the horse plunged forward into space. An instant later only a blank expanse of moonlight hillock was visible.

ON April 12th the Kingston *Crown-News* of Jamaica published the following item:

> Roadtown, Tortola—The body of Mrs. Dolph Prescott, wife of the well-known millionaire and sportsman, was recovered today from the off-shore waters of the eastern side of this island, a few hundred yards from the anchorage of the Prescott yacht, *Mariegalante*. Death was attributed by the British warrant officer of Roadtown as due to accidental drowning.
>
> Further police investigation, however, was indicated at a late hour when several details in connection with the death were uncovered. One of the passengers of the yacht, Mark Lockridge, author of several popular novels with a West Indian locale, was found some distance inland on the island, his body bruised and lacerated as if from some sharp instrument. Dolph Prescott was reported to be in a dazed condition and unable to be interviewed.
>
> A curious sidelight was added by the fact that the right hand of the drowned woman was found to be clutching a tuft of white hair from a horse's mane. There are no horses on Tortola.

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Tryst Beyond the Years

BETH is a name that deserves to be loved. A soft name, suggestive of moonlit nights and the whispered murmurs of endearment. Of lacy frills and flowing chiffon, of the subdued background music of a string quartet playing something old—of course, old—as a setting. Faint perfume that lingers in men's memories, and a smile and charm as unforgettable as womankind herself.

The whole of it—Miss Beth Simpson—was less moon-washed, tiptoes and curtsey. Miss Beth Simpson—quite prosaic and suitable for use on the nearest—print, don't scribble—resort hotel register.

That was the beginning. The Simpson you get from your family. The Beth is wholly yours, to be said first with that unreachable pride of the six-year-old pointing in on herself and announcing in accents uncertain but purposeful:

"I'm Beth!"

Which was quite so since first she could remember.

Now the years ran together like colors in the rain. Like the rain, wind-driven, that washed and worried at the square, Hodgson prefabricated house at cliffside. Petals of rain making the oblong windows opaque, turning eyes from The View—see, it says here you can see the whole of the lake from the cliffside bungalows—inward towards the white-covered bed, the two (one comfortable) chairs and the writing desk for sending back those, "Wish you were . . ." cards.

All rooms, if not created equal, become so in the rain. In Bangkok or New York, Kalamazoo or Liverpool . . . or at Creel's Mountain Lakes. That's what the sign said on the wall. . . . "Tell Your Friends. Ideal for Vacations, Honeymoons. All Sports, Central Cuisine. Forget Your Worries. CREEL'S MOUNTAIN LAKES. . . . Where The Sun Always Shines." (Please put light out before leaving cabin. . . . Thank you. I. Faber, Mgr.)

The white-board cabin with real-looking paneling was hers for one week, which was all Beth could afford. Money, although not an insurmountable problem in her life was at least always a consideration.

The neatness of the room-and-a-half was unchanged since Beth's arrival. Her belongings—for the week—stowed away neatly into the closet. There was a magazine she'd bought on the train up. And the silver-framed picture of Him she stood carefully on her bedtable where it would not miss a thing.

FOR all of the weather outside, the impenetrable screen of rain and mist, there might have been a prairie or skyscraper beyond her window instead of the lake and the cliffs that stood here against the eastern sweep of the waters.

But Beth knew the color of sky, the blinding sparkle of the lake and the brown-gray pillar of cliff as she had known it before there had been a Development and noisy all-ages in store knickers, frocks and sunsuits playing at tennis and golf and using the pool, sipping cocktails and complaining about sore muscles and sunburn and Damn, I have only three more days!

In the rain you can stop and catch your breath. Beth did. She had time to think of all the running-away. And here, here where she would rather be than anywhere else be-

BY MALCOLM KENNETH MURCHIE

All comes to he—or she—who waits, no matter how many the weary years

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Heading by Vincent Napoli

cause, well, because of so very much, had now the discordant quality of Benny Goodman's clarinet at High Church.

She'd noticed with distaste the multi-colored banner across the gates where before no gates and nothing else had been: "Welcome to Creel's Mountain Lakes. . . . Stay Awhile and You'll Come Again." Things like such. They annoyed her. But that wasn't it.

It was this other. The running. It first happened when she had pigtails and the memory of her Mummy was a fading thing

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to be refreshed by the big picture in the living room. Not as strong as the memory of the soreness in her neck and the kind lady who'd appeared beyond the rim of her father and doctors' stern attentions, come to her to say, "I'm your Aunt Edith and you're going to feel better very soon."

Of course, her mother's death, which was a big thing, had taken place in the early shadows of her life. And the little thing, mumps, had been later.

That night when the great house was supposed to be asleep, Aunt Edith had come and bundled her up, whispering to her to be very quiet. The words she had reconstructed in later life. They went something like this:

"I know you are very young, Beth, but, dear, I'm going to take you away from this house and that man. You belong to your poor mother and to me." They went out a back way into the night and somewhere at a great rate through the darkness.

Some of the darkness dispersed as Beth grew away from her leggings and pigtails. But it always came back on even the brightest day. Beth still remembered the sunshine streaking through the windows of Aunt Edith's small home the day her father and the other man with the briefcase arrived. There were loud words, and Aunt Edith cried and cried while the child crouched above on the stairs looking through the banisters.

In the end Julia, Aunt Edith's domestic, who made gingerbread Beth could still smell and taste, came upstairs and said, "Child, you're leaving us. You're going with Mister Simpson." And when the old servant turned from the trunk in which Beth's pinafores were being packed, some of Aunt Edith's tears were on her face too.

Beth had gone back to the big, dark lonely house. Her father, who was like the house, frightened her when he looked at her with his broad, heavy face and black hair and no laughter in him anywhere when she recited: "I asked my mother for fifty cents, to see the elephant jump the fence."

Mr. Simpson just looked at her and looked at her, and something in his face made her want to run away as far as China to hide with the upside-down people, but once when she had tried it, Jack Green, the grocer, had caught her seven blocks away and brought her back: "I found the tyke all the way down by the park, Mister Simpson."

Her father had taken her up to her room, holding her with a grip that would have made her cry out if she'd not been so scared. Crying was something her father would not let her do, so it was saved for night when the old house was silent and empty of everything but her sorrow and fear.

THEN there'd been another day that Aunt Edith had come again. A strange, terrible day of alien sounds. A large man with a chain across his waistcoat, reading a paper, and another man with Aunt Edith, and all the time her father roaring in his big full voice made so well for roaring.

Then he called her down, and Aunt Edith cried and ran to her. But Beth's father stood there and looked and looked and said, "Beth is my daughter, and I mean to have her no matter what you do."

In the end Beth went off with Aunt Edith, back to the house on the other side of town, to Julia and gingerbread and sunshine. But fear went along with them, a fear that Beth realized and felt here as in the other house. Aunt Edith, when they were at home, would always seem to be listening. She would start at noises. Beth came to listen and start too. When they went anywhere, Aunt Edith seemed to keep watch, and Beth found that she herself took up the watching. Although in those years she was sure she didn't know just what the listening or the watching were for . . . unless it was for Father Simpson but Aunt would never say.

In the years that followed, they traveled; Aunt Edith and Beth, and Julia to take care of things and make gingerbread at the stove of rented houses. They traveled swiftly and without warning and Beth, thinking of last summer's home of maybe lilacs and honeysuckle with a bird's nest, would ooh with glee and ask if they were going "there" again?

Aunt Edith, with shadows in her eyes would say, "Not there this time, Beth, my dear. But somewhere *nice*."

Beth remembered seeing her father just once again. It was at a railroad station. They'd gone there hurriedly one early morning and had just caught the train. So hurriedly that Beth had left her very favorite

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doll behind in the hotel room. As the cars began to slip out of the station, Beth heard Aunt Edith give a little cry and point out the window. Julia had crowded past Beth and tried to cut off the child's vision with her body.

But not before Beth had seen the tall figure running along the platform trying to keep pace with the train and swinging a heavy cane as though he would beat at its metal sides. But the face was what Beth would remember in nightmares, its broad, strong features about to burst with the emotions that contorted it. Then the train, gathering speed, left the specter behind, and Julia was bending over Aunt Edith with smelling salts.

That was the last time Beth saw her father alive.

THERE were many places they traveled to, and there was time for studies and, as time passed, Beth's first party frock. And a visit to a huge old man who huffed and puffed like a porpoise while he thumped and prodded Beth, saying to Aunt Edith who was worried, "There's nothing the matter with this little girl, but she's nervous."

Aunt Edith said, "Thank you, Doctor Maxwell," but she went on worrying about her little girl who had taken up the watching and listening where she, Edith, had left off. And of course, there was no need for it anymore since they'd received the news about Mr. Simpson's death. But how could you explain that to a youngster without explaining a lot of other things that she shouldn't ever know?

It was later that they discovered the lake and the cliffs. Julia was gone now—Aunt Edith used to say, "We just have one another now, dear—" and Beth thought this was the nicest place in all the world.

It was here that she met Him, which should be capitalized like that for there'd never been anyone else and never would be. In the beginning Aunt Edith "disapproved" but it was token, bent only from a desire that Beth be sure and have the best.

Then came her aunt's sudden death and the inevitable changes that came with that. No time to think about the heartache, just the record of the thing . . . that other, soon to follow, mustn't even think about that. The sore finger you mustn't prod but keep coming back to.

Sitting in the prefabricated cabin now, Beth thought of it all, the events that crowded one after another like the rain drops sliding down the pane.

There were lawyers and conferences, those endless useless sessions where the obvious is made obscure and the obscure impossible. Then the brown manila envelopes that helped—but not quite—with the way of life.

Beth went to work. Her first job seemed such a short time ago. Well, wasn't it?

Her hair was long and brown, and she had small, pretty hands that were better at doing exercises on the piano than office work. The solicitor had said:

"I know it isn't much. Your father's affairs were in very bad shape and your aunt lived beyond the limit of her income. But with what you will get regularly, supplemented with some work, part time or occasional, you will do quite nicely."

"*'Quite nicely,'*" he had said. Of course he didn't know.

Then it was, with the working and all, perhaps she got over-tired—Beth was never robust, she was on the small-boned, small-bodied side—that she began to notice.

FIRST time was on the block near her room. She noticed because it was Spring and there were sounds in the air she was listening to, making her think of the lake and the cliffs. She heard the hard click of the man's heels. When she slowed, he slowed. When she stopped, he stopped, and when she turned in at her place, he was looking purposefully in another direction. A small thing, and someone else would not notice. But she knew.

Then there was the time in the waiting room of the station. She was making a short trip in connection with her work. Another man, oh remembered well, with a checked suit and a heavy mustache. He was reading a paper. But she knew he looked around the sides and over the top and rustled the journal impatiently as though he had no notice in the world except for the printed legends in front of him.

When she got up to leave for her train, she heard with ears that knew how to listen for such things, that he had got up too and

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was following her. Just as she got aboard, she turned quickly and looked back down the length of Pullmans and saw a checked suit getting aboard several cars away.

Like that. Over and over. There was no mistake. Never was an attempt made to harm her; the man, men, for they wore different faces, never spoke to her. But the pattern of her life was suited to the tempo of these people. And it was accustomed. She'd known what it was like to be the pursued and to carry fear with her since she could remember. She carried fear gracefully and pretended it didn't weigh.

She had one thought to cling to. Him. And she thought of the things they'd said under the azure sky, with the soft smell of country and lake in their nostrils. She would be faithful to him; she had said it and sworn it.

If she held herself rigidly there like a fly pinioned to the wall by a pin, the uneasiness about everything else fled from her mind and heart.

And so she had known Creel's before it was Creel's. And several miles below the lake, known so well, Locust Corners where they had met again and again.

It was strange what drew her back now as though that were the only thing that mattered. And perhaps it was. The difference, the shining entrepreneur project of sham, glitter and noise, fell away before her eyes, and it was only as before, as she had known the lake, cliffs and Locust Corners with Him.

Behind the screen of rain the sky was lightening, and Beth peered out. It was getting on toward supper time, but she decided against going up to the Annex for supper. The play organizer was a fearfully conscientious young man who would come up to her and say, "Now Miss Simpson, we'd like to sign you up for some of our activities."

Oh heavens, Beth thought, as her quick small hands put together something to eat that would be much better than the noisy dining hall.

Time passes rapidly listening to the rain. When there was no rain to listen to, darkness had come, and the cool evening air that came through the window when she opened it was clear and refreshing. Out there beyond the fall of the cliffs, she could hear the lake. She sniffed, and knew from the smell that tomorrow would be clear and sunshiny.

Beth got ready for bed. It was a ritual, womanlike, that ended in the same way. She picked up the silver-framed picture, smiled at it and placed the tips of her fingers on her lips and blew a kiss. Then she turned out the light, and in total darkness listened to the night and her thoughts until she fell asleep.

BETH awoke to the alien breathing and bumping. Her shaking fingers found the lamp switch. He was in the corner of the room. A hulk of a man with ill-arranged dark hair and huge, dirty hands that did not come alive but dangled even as the rest of him whirled and blinked at the sudden light.

He had, Beth noticed, a broad, brutal face; his mouth gaped and he made sounds totally unintelligible. With her tiny fear-fumbling hands, she pulled away the bedclothes and slipped bare feet to the ground. The creature took a lurching step toward her and as he did, Beth, instinctively, snatched the silver-framed picture from the bedtable and began to edge her way sideways along the wall toward the door. The brute stood regarding her with uncertainty, mouth slack now, streaks of red flame in his small eyes.

Then with a quick and half-deceptive feint, Beth whirled, made the screen door and was out into the night, the man behind, mumbling loudly and taking the first heavy steps to follow.

Outside, putting her back to the cottage, Beth ran away into the black mouth of the night, holding the picture to her small bosom.

Once she stumbled as she ran. She must not trip and be caught. She tightened her grasp on the picture and went on. Out here the darkness was friend. She had only to fear a broad, brutal face, black hair . . . someone who made sounds without laughing. Then the dreadful thought came to her that Jack Green, the grocer, might loom up out of the night, capture her and take her back that long, long way across the years. The thinking made her bare feet move even faster over the slick wetness of the ground.

Ahead, the night opened out for the cliff-top, and all of a sudden she heard the lap

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of lake water from far below. Behind she detected a small sound that must be pursuit, but she knew her mind before that. As a child Beth had often believed that if she leaped into the air and willed it hard enough, she would fly and be safe. That came to her now, and when she jumped there was a certainty as the swift air engulfed her in an ecstacy that drove all else from her mind except the last obligation to clutch the picture to her falling body.

* * * * * *

MR. IRVING FABER was annoyed and bothered. Mr. Creel, the Creel of Creel's Mountain Lakes, who stayed with his balance sheets, out-size paunch and bank accounts in the city, would be angered when he heard. Then there were other complications.

"Damn, you Gormley," Faber said for the tenth time that day as he stared at the hulk of man lounging in the chair opposite him in the Development's office off the Annex. Early fear had sobered the handyman, but last night Gormley had been on one of his toots. And if the actual act of entering a guest's bungalow and scaring its occupant into running out into the night and off a cliff could be charged to the man-of-all-work if worse came to worse, he, Faber, was nevertheless responsible for the help. Mr. Creel would say—ah yes, he could just hear the owner—"And why, pray Faber, do we *employ* drunken incompetents at Creel's Mountain Lakes, eh?"

The latest word from the nearest hospital—relayed to Faber, for Beth Simpson had come alone and without friends or kin; they knew nothing of relatives and such in the outside world, if indeed she had any—was that she was still in the most critical condition and not expected to live. The phoning official observed that she had several times mentioned a Jack Green, and murmured that she didn't want "to be taken back." Faber expressed his helplessness and requested perfunctorily that they do all they could for her.

The manager knew it would be a considerably more serious thing if Miss Simpson died, demanding a sheriffs inquiry and all that, which would make Mr. Creel most angry. Faber turned his disapproving gaze back on Gormley.

The handyman squirmed uncomfortably under the scrutiny. "Aw hell! Can't a man take a little drink once in a while?"

"Once in a while," mimicked Faber irritably. "One little drink, as you call it, shouldn't make you so blind drunk as to stumble into a woman's cabin in the middle of the night!"

Gormley made a face. "That old Simpson crow! Must be close to seventy, that one. Thinking I was after her, the old buzzard!" the man snorted.

"Oh, I don't know," Faber bristled up slightly. He was getting along himself. He leveled a finger at the other. "Just keep yourself in shape, Gormley. Someone may want to ask you some questions."

IN TOURING the grounds a bit later, Faber had to admit to himself that last night's unfortunate event seemed to have left the rest of the guests untouched. Of course, he reasoned, few of them had seen the old spinster in the three days she'd been up here. The tennis went on, the pool splashed, and Faber, looking in at the glass-windowed bar, saw that that source of company profit was well-attended.

Here and there, somebody asked him a question which he avoided or evaded with the aplomb of a seasoned management man. Irving Faber finally came to the conclusion that his worst fears were not to be realized; certainly there was no pall of gloom here. He was pleased, for the croquet handicap matches were about to start. A little invention of the play director, the matches were a fine combination of drinking, kissing and other silliness, with croquet figuring only incidentally.

Faber seated himself on the front verandah to watch. The lawn was certainly crowded; Joe from the bar gave him a wink which meant that the till was doing well. The croquet extravaganza went on to the hoot, yips and noise of the only partially sober guest contestants and spectators.

It was about five when Faber saw it. Up the long drive from the gates it came at a great rate, and as it passed the players—many of them now more than considerably the worse for wear—they turned to stare and then laugh or shout.

Certainly the high-sided, shiny buggy was

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an incongruous sight, pulled by the large, brown-marked roan. But the two occupants, one the driver, the other the passenger, were even more so. As the carriage wheeled around in front of the porch steps, the driver, a fine old Negro with powder-white hair, drew in the animal, and the whole rig came to a stop.

Faber went down the steps, wondering what tomfoolery this was. Several of the guests crowded forward curiously. The passenger was a young man, about thirty Faber would have guessed. He alighted from the carriage with dignity and grace and came forward. He was straight and tall with a handsome, strong face. The manager noted the ludicrously old-fashioned clothes of the two. The young man wore a high collar and black-buttoned shoes such as were in vogue nearly a half-century ago. He had a large and fancy cravat, a striped waistcoat and a frock coat with swallow tail.

Some of the guests were exclaiming gleefully about a "masquerade" as the young man called over his shoulder.

"I'll be just a minute, Uncle Ned."

The old darky nodded and touched his forehead in understanding. The watchers tittered at the show.

"You, sir," the gentleman addressed himself to Faber.

"Yes," the manager found his voice. He looked into the blue eyes of the other and found himself riveted there.

"I've come for Miss Beth Simpson." Those in the front row of guests who overheard passed this back to the ones behind, and the whispering increased and then hushed for listening.

Faber frowned. What sort of poor joke was this? He must get rid of this tactless clown as soon as possible.

"Miss Beth Simpson?" The man repeated. Faber beckoned to the other to come up the stairs with him. The manager had it in his mind to denounce the gentleman, whoever he was, give him a tongue-lashing and send him on his way. Instead, when the other joined him on the porch, Faber felt strangely affected and compelled beyond his control. He found himself telling the straight story of last night's events.

"I see," the old-fashioned costumed young man said, his features immobile. He seemed to ponder a moment, then with a brief bow he made his way back down the stairs to the buggy.

THE crowd of vacation funsters stood around expectantly, looking from the rig and its two occupants to Faber for explanation, waiting for the gimmick.

Elaborately, the young man took out a greatwatch from his waistcoat, studied it.

"Uncle Ned, we'll be off. I expect I shall meet Miss Beth at Locust Corners at nine."

The old colored man had his crop out almost before the words were completed. He bobbed his head, "Yassuh, Mister Phillip," and the horse and buggy made off down the driveway at the same rapid rate.

Faber passed the whole thing off as the crude joke of some townie, but the guests, once interrupted by this unusual tableau, seemed unwilling to go back to the croquet and gradually drifted off still talking about it among themselves.

Early in the evening the manager got word from the hospital that Beth Simpson had just died. The news, not unexpected, but strangely disquieting when it came, sent Faber down to the cabin post-haste. There might be things, he reasoned, that a good resort manager should see before, or instead of, the authorities. Mr. Creel would approve. There had been a picture found at the bottom of the cliff with the woman. It had been brought back and dumped carelessly on the humble pile of belongings waiting for disposition in the corner.

Faber picked it up and studied it. The glass of course was shattered, but the picture was . . . the face . . . was . . . the young man of the carriage. With fingers that suddenly seemed strangely stiff he turned the picture to the light to read the inscription.

"To my always faithful Beth, from her ever-loving Phillip." The frame-back was loosened; something showed from inside. Faber was neither a coward nor a superstitious man. But as he probed the loose back off and scrutinized the yellow-with-age cut protected in some opaque envelope, he felt the coldness spreading from his stomach as he read.

Faber kept the clipping, putting it carefully in his breast pocket, but replaced the picture with elaborate care and returned

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to the Annex as fast as he could command strength-drained legs. Some of the guests were dancing, and a young girl, silly and tipsy, was wondering out loud how she could "get" the young man of the buggy.

"I'll take him, even in that suit," she cried, and her audience roared with laughter. Faber winced. The palms of his hands were clammy.

Then somebody said that if she went to Locust Corners down in the valley she might meet him again—after all, wasn't he to meet his true love, Beth Simpson, there at nine? Others took the idea up, and there was much giggling talk of an expedition. The manager, feeling suddenly not himself at all, went to his office.

It was almost nine now. Faber, despite himself, took out the old clipping from the picture-back, and read it over again.

It was dated 1908 and reported an accident to Mr. Phillip Hargrave, 28, which had taken place when the buggy in which he had been riding plunged off the cliff road. The cut mentioned that the rig belonged to Uncle Ned's livery and that Uncle Ned himself, the driver, had also been fatally injured. The clip concluded that Hargrave had been on his way to Locust Corners to meet Miss Beth Simpson to whom he was to have been married the following week.

Faber had just finished reading when the clock of his office chimed nine.

Locust Corners was some miles away, and he hoped fervently that none of the shameless guests had had time to get there.

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Such Stuff As Dreams

BY SEABURY QUINN

The cold wind blows and all about ghosts laugh with a shrill, malicious glee

We are such stuff as dreams are made of,
And our little life is rounded with a sleep.
—*The Tempest, Act IV, Sc. 1*

WHEN the Very Reverend Gerald Pancoast read the lessons Sunday mornings, or when he preached at evensong, adoring tears jeweled every feminine eyelash and every woman's heart beat just a little faster.

For Gerald was the perfect, the pluperfect, answer to a maiden's prayer—or a matron's or a widow's, for that matter. Tall, wide-shouldered, with a profile like John Barrymore's before loose living blunted it, white skin and sleek black hair and deep-set

Heading by John Giunta

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eyes so darkly blue they were like spots of shadow in the pale oval of his face. More than one young woman's heart was near to breaking as she remembered he was a vowed celibate.

His languishing admirers had no notion of his other life. The dreamland in which milky-skinned Circassian girls with hair as russet as the copper beech and small high breasts and eyes like tortoise-shell awaited him, or Russian women, white as the moon, or Mongol maidens with slant eyes and lily feet, like the daughter of the Kha Khan Messer Marco Polo knew and loved so long ago in far Cathay.

Gerald had found it when he was just a little boy, and it was still his refuge and asylum from grim reality. Worn out with Lenten and pre-Easter work, Father had gone to Atlantic City for a few days, and Mother had gone with him, so Gerald had been sent to Aunt Lillian.

Aunt Lillian's was an old house, a place designed with dignity and crowned with innate beauty. It stood back from the street behind a screen of maples and oaks and looked out on what had once been a lovely lawn. The place was run down now, the grass was frayed and moth-eaten beneath the trees, and the trees themselves needed trimming, but it had mellowed beautifully, and like the sturdy gentlewoman who owned it made a brave show of facing down adversity in old age. Inside, mingled with the smell of lavender and cloves, there was an odor of dry leather. The shutters were too seldom opened and the heating was inadequate; fuel was expensive and the pension paid a soldier's widow had to be stretched like a heretic on the rack to provide minimum subsistence.

Easter had come early that year and there were neither smiling skies nor daffodils to greet it. It rained almost continuously, not with soft spring showers, but in steady drenching downpours, and when the rain stopped the dregs of it lay in the gutters and the roads were pockmarked with sad muddy puddles. Gerald had to stay indoors, and it was there he found the entranceway to his dream world.

The parlor was a formidable place. Whatnots stood like spectral sentinels in the corners, a Procrustean haircloth-covered sofa stretched between the seldom-opened windows, the chairs were ceremented in gray linen and the massive Bible on the table seemed ominous as the Book of Doomsday. But in the age-black walnut bookcase was a copy of Sir Henry Yule's translation of Marco Polo's journal illustrated with woodcuts. The text was far too recondite for Gerald's reading, but he spelt the captions underneath the cuts out, and their syllables raced his blood like the long roll of a drum. Bokhara, Samarkand, Tiflis, the Gobi—names freighted with a magic completely their own.

As he looked in fascination at the stilted drawings they seemed to take on perspective, and unwittingly as little Alice when she passed the portal of the looking-glass he found himself in a strange land, a land of warmth and brightness teeming with insouciant gayety, where life was measured by no rising moons or setting suns or by the mechanisms of clocks.

Some lads scourge the Caribbean with Sir Henry Morgan, some share the hardships of a desert isle with Robinson Crusoe, others, less daring, the watered-down adventures of the Swiss Family Robinson. For Gerald there was that far country where the Polos traveled, where blue and pink tiled houses hung like bright beads threaded on the narrow streets and camel bells and muttering tomtoms were an obbligato to high brittle laughter and love songs quavered in shrill, nasal falsetto.

He was a big boy, twelve or thirteen, before he timidly drew back the curtain from his dreamland and invited an adult to share its enchantments.

The fond look in his mother's eyes as he began describing the Xanadu to which he fled from the dull routine of Latin, logarithms and the Litany on Sunday morning became first a question, then an appeal, finally a stare of sickened fear. "I'll have to tell your father about this," she said in a voice from which all feeling seemed to have been wrung.

Father was an assistant, but not the principal one, at Saint Simon and Saint Jude's. He was a good earnest worker, a conscientious preacher and a staunch churchman. He strove sincerely to live by his faith, but that faith was narrow as the grave, and

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as inexorable. To him the devil was no abstract representative or evil; he was personal and corporeal and had been hurled in the flesh from heaven's battlements by the Archangel Michael. When he prayed that he might beat Satan down under his feet he meant it literally and physically.

Terror spread across his face like moss on sour ground as Mother told him of their son's dream country. "And he sees women—heathen wantons—in these dreams?" he asked in a small cold voice.

"It seems so, Hillary."

"God save us! They are succubi, Matilda, the ancient device of the Archfiend for the ruin of men's souls and bodies!"

So Gerald was called to the study and for the first time heard an unexpurgated version of the Temptation of Saint Anthony. Then Father prayed that he and all good Christians might be delivered from the snares of the Evil One, and dismissed him with the command to pray faithfully each night that he might not be further troubled by unholy dreams, and "not to think about such dreadful things" while waking.

But somehow the dreams did not disappear. Indeed the longer he was on his knees before he went to bed the more vivid were the visions, the more alluring the sweet songs of Araby, the more affectionately artless and delighted with his coming were the girls of Circasia and Cathay and High Tartary.

GERALD progressed from Saint Timothy's to Harvard where he conscientiously eschewed Professor Nock's courses in the history of religion, beer binges at Jim's Place, cocktail parties at "Santa Clara's," petting parties with Radcliffians and similar undergraduate in discretions, and in due time was given his *artium baccalaureus cum laude*. After three years at the Seminary he was ordained a deacon, then a priest.

He served as curate in three fashionable churches, each a little larger and more stylish than its predecessor, making friends and having no small influence on people by his good looks, gentle manners and innocuous preaching, but chiefly by his good looks. There was a fluttering of hearts each time he presided at a Girls' Friendly meeting, the lady teachers could not drag their eyes from him when he conducted Church School, when he moved from chancel to lectern to read the lessons the involuntary sighing of the choir girls was like the rustle of a small wind in a summer wood.

He kept his interest in the ewe lambs of his flocks on a platonic basis, for the honorable estate of holy matrimony played no part in his plans. He had been reared in a curate's household and knew poverty and the rigors that attended it. There had never been sufficient ready cash for anything. Money had to be "found" for his education, even for the modest wardrobe of canonicals with which he began his ministry, and the finding of it was a dour process that entailed the sale of cherished heirlooms and the long drawn out repayment of principal and compound interest. He could support himself on curate's wages, but a family or even childless marriage would entangle him past all hope of release.

There were rich girls in his congregations and their hearts beat quite as quickly at his nearness as those of their less well-dowered sisters, but their parents knew the Social Register as they knew their prayers, and knew Dun and Bradstreet even better. An obscure curate without background and with small hope of preferment was hardly rated as a catch. Gerald risked no rebuffs or affronts.

The deanery of the Cathedral of Saint Michael and All Angels was vacant, but the bishop was a High Churchman who would countenance no married clerics in the chapter. His canons were all dedicated celibates. If Gerald would be reasonable. . . .

Reasonable? The deanship meant security and safety. It meant a mellow old red-brick house filled with Georgian silver and mahogany, with carpets from Muskhabad on its waxed floors and paintings dating back to West and Copley on its tinted walls; it meant yearly trips to Europe—and not tourist class—or summers on Cape Cod or Martha's Vineyard; social recognition. In fine it offered everything that one born with the tastes of an aristocrat and pauper's purse could reasonable hope for.

In the chapel of Saint Justin Martyr Gerald took the vow of celibacy according to the Anglo-Catholic rite while candles burned

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with lambent golden brightness and organ murmurs and the acrid, anesthetic reek of incense filled the air and from the painted windows olden saints seemed smiling on him as they welcomed him to their company and offered him a portion of their anguishes and ecstacies, their despairs and their raptures. And afterwards he was installed as dean.

IN HIS new surroundings Gerald burgeoned like a shrub transplanted from the desert to a garden. He played good tennis and still better golf, he danced well, talked well; he was much in demand socially.

The yoke of celibacy did not weigh heavily on him. His dreams, he knew by now, were only shadows, empty visions. He had never in his life seen any woman who could approach those girls of his fantasies. If he had, he might have known a tragic and desparing love, and even that would have been fulfillment in some measure, for it was not merely the thought of happiness that fascinated him. For a being such as one of those he dreamt of he knew he could suffer agonies. But he had never seen a woman who could fit his ideal, or even vaguely approach it, never conceived of one in the flesh, until. . . .

The Arbuthnots had given a small theatre party, and afterwards they went to the Pantoufle Dorée. They arrived just in time for the supper show and Gerald had not sipped half of his Oloroso when the lights were lowered. A beam of golden brightness cut the blue smoke-clouded atmosphere, a beam that focused on the gilded archway at the far end of the dance floor, and slowly, almost ominously, the orchestra began Ravel's *Bolero*. "Ladies and gentlemen," announced the emcee from his perch on the bandstand, "Allura!"

From chin to heel she was sheathed in a gown of Tartar red shot through with threads of gold, its clinging folds no more obscuring her long slender lines than a fruit's rind conceals its contours. Slim throat and tapering shoulders, lush fictile breasts and sleek lithe hips were outlined by its silken embrace. From hem to knee it was slit up each side, displaying cream-white legs and feet and gold slave bracelets flashing on each fragile ankle. Behind her head, poised like the nimbus of a saint, she held a gilded tambourine.

Her face was like an ivory temple-mask, bone white, calm, bland, almost contemptuous, with upward-slanting eyes and high cheek-bones, slashed scarlet mouth and brows so slimly black they might have been drawn with a pen and India ink. Her iridescently black hair lay on her small head like a patent leather skullcap, smoothly parted in the middle and drawn tight across her ears to loop in a great heavy knot at the nape of her neck.

Slowly, aloofly, as if she were alone and did it for her own amusement, she began to dance. The sensuous percussions of the *Bolero* were transposed into motion, the urgent rhythm of the kettle drums was mocked and echoed in staccato by the hollow booming of taut parchment as she struck her tambourine with fist and elbow alternately. Her feet were scarcely moving, but her body undulated with a graceful bending like grain swaying in the wind. Pose melted into plastic pose as a kaleidoscope's prism present fresh patterns when the tube is turned. There was a sudden gleam of white against red silk. With her left hand she ripped her gown from throat to waist and as a strip of pale body showed through the tear the tip of a white breast peeped for an instant, then retreated like a frightened pink-nosed kitten.

With the suddenness of frenzy she dashed her fist through the tambourine and flung the ruined instrument to the floor, thrust her arms out right and left as if she had been crucified against the air, jerked back her head and shoulders and curved her body like a bent bow. Her torn robe burst like the calyx of a bursting bud to let her young apple-firm breasts thrust forth, beautiful almost beyond imagining.

"Boy, what a playmate *she'd* make these long winter evenings!" chuckled Arbuthnot as the lights went up. "For my money she's —why, what's the matter, Gerald?"

Gerald's heart was jerking like a thing in its death struggles, through every pore of him a cold wind blew, and it seemed all about him ghosts were laughing with a shrill malicious glee. "I—I—" his voice was like a rook's croak in his throat, his

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tongue and lips were stiff, almost paralyzed. "O, my God Almighty!"

In seminary days he had told himself that if ever he met a woman like the creatures of his dreams he would fling textbooks aside and go with her, though their way together led through poverty and squalor to disgrace. Even after ordination he had felt no sacrifice would be too great if in return he might share life with such a being. But now. . . .

He had seen her like a dream walking, like a vision made carnate. She was the distillate and concrescence of all the women of his dreams, and he might not go to her. He was barred and interdicted, emasculated by a vow as Origen and Abelard had been by steel.

A man of coarser fiber—or a less devout one—might have rebelled at the embargo and thrust his vow of chastity aside. But Gerald was the son and grandson of clergymen; despite his overlie, of sophistication his faith was simple and direct, almost naïve. He no more thought of questioning the fixed immutability of sacredotal celibacy than of doubting the validity of the law of gravitation.

Life stretched before him like an interminable alley of loneliness.

He was sick and faint with longing and denied desire when he finally reached the deanery that night. Sleep would not come, and till the changing light before the dawn showed in the sky he walked a frustrated quadrangle in his room. At last a dose of phenobarbital brought physical surcease, but no respite from memories.

The thought of her was like a haunting phantom. He saw her everywhere, in shop windows, in passing taxicabs, at busy street crossings. Her face, so like a mask, with slanting eyes and haughty brows and full red rutile lips hung a little slack as though with longing, swam between him and the text he tried to read, when he begged divine deliverance he saw it through his tight-closed lids. He wanted her, yearned for her as a miser yearns for his gold or an addict for his drug.

THE fox in Aesop's fable denounced the high-hung grapes as sour; by degrees Gerald achieved compensation in discovering the *blanc de chine* feet of his idol were common clay.

He read the gossip columns of café avidly; when he learned Allura, bright particular star of the Pantoufle Dorée, was the current heart-throb of five-times-married, four-times-divorced Willy Hauptman, heir to a soft drink fortune, he was almost elated. When Mrs. Hauptman the fifth named Allura correspondent in a divorce suit that made headlines from Portland, Maine, to its namesake in Oregon he found comfort in the news. "She is Jezebel," he told himself. "She is the Scarlet Woman of the blessed John's vision." And every night he gave thanks to his personal, anthropomorphic God that He had saved him from enmeshment by this wanton.

Headlines shrieked across the country like a pack of fiends in full cry. Bull-voiced newsboys echoed them hysterically. The tabloids had a field day:

DANCER SLAYS RICH PLAYBOY

Hauptman Shot by Night
Club Entertainer in Love
Nest on Palatial Yacht

The sordid story varied slightly from others of its sort as one movie plot does from another. Jessamin Cawley, known professionally as Allura, and Willy Hauptman had spent the week-end on his cabin cruiser the *Leprechaun*. The crew of three had been dismissed just after dinner Saturday and Willy and his guest had settled down to a night's drinking and love-making.

A little after five the next morning the lookout on the harbor police launch had seen a woman in pajamas dash from the yacht's cabin to the after deck and draw in the dinghy tied astern. She had climbed into the boat and was fumbling with the painter when a man rushed after her and began to haul the line in. He shouted something and she screamed a reply, then drew a pistol from her jacket and fired twice at pointblank range.

Two hours later Willy Hauptman died at Mercy Hospital in circumstances of elaborate discomfort, but not before his dying

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declaration pinned an inescapable charge of murder on Allura.

He had, he said, informed his paramour (an epithet beloved of the tabloids) that he had no intention of marrying her when his wife obtained her decree, whereupon she flew into a rage. He was accustomed to take large amounts of currency on cruises in order to have cash on hand if banking facilities were not available. Allura had snatched up a sheaf of bills and his pistol and screamed, "I'll take this for a down payment on my breach of promise suit!" as she rushed from the cabin. When he followed to retrieve the money she shot him.

The trial was Grade-A entertainment. No tasty bit of testimony went unpublished. There were pictures of the *Leprechaun* at anchor and at sea, pictures of Willy and his town and country houses, pictures of Allura in her famous Tartar dance and as she sat beside her counsel at the trial table, pictures of her as a police matron led her from the courtroom and as she entered jail.

Her lawyers did their clever best to make the shooting appear "in defense of her honor," but their best fell short of requirements. Allura was no wide-eyed ingénue; her love affairs had been notoriously varied and remunerative. Two of her former suitors were in prison for embezzlement, a third had shot himself in fear of blackmail, Also, she had fired the fatal shots in furtherance of a felony, to wit, the larceny of five hundred dollars, which had been found on her by the police.

There came a day when the newspapers showed a picture of her muffled to the eyes in a raincoat and handcuffed to an Amazonian matron as she entered the state prison where the death house was. Then, like a puppy tired of shaking a frayed rag-doll, the press dropped her for a while.

TWO candles in tall silver standards splashed a baroque pool of light on the antique kidney desk where Gerald sat. In the corners of the study shadows advanced and retreated as the pointed orange candle flames wavered in the light breeze that crept through the French windows looking out on the garden.

He had to write his sermon for next Sunday afternoon, for it was Friday and next day he was to umpire tennis matches at Rock Spring, and after that there would be tea at the clubhouse, then dinner with the Siblings. Text after text he picked up and discarded. Somehow he could not find the precise verse to set up thought-gemmation.

The mellow tritone of the study 'phone broke through his abstraction, and he had an eerie feeling of some quality of dark enchantment in the air as he picked up the instrument.

"Dean Pancoast?" the challenge came in the clipped, brittle accents of a character in a Noel Coward comedy.

"Yes."

"This is Howard Ambrose, Warden Parnell's secret'ry."

"Yes?"

"The death sentence is to be executed on a prisoner at ten fifty-nine tonight. Perhaps you've heard of her. Her name is Jassamin Cawley—on the stage they called her Allura."

Something like a jet of gellid air seemed playing on the back of Gerald's neck, he felt a shiver zigzag up his spine, but mechanically he answered, "Yes?"

"She's asked for you—wants you to be with her when—it seems she heard you preach once at the Cathedral, and. . . ."

The sharp-clipped words paused in aposiopesis, and in Gerald's heart a mighty shout rang like a pæan of triumph: "She wants you—she needs you—she has asked for you. What does it matter if she's good or bad or innocent or guilty? You love her, adore her. Go to her!"

His voice had all that timbre of superb gentility that made his preaching so successful as he asked, "Isn't there a chaplain at the prison?"

"Why, yes, sir, but—"

"I think it would be best if he consoled the unfortunate young woman when—in her extremity. That sort of thing is rather out of my line." He hesitated for a space that might have marked a rest in four-four time, then, "Besides, I'm indisposed."

"He did not hear the secretary's murmured, "Why, you dirty, self-righteous son of—" for he laid the 'phone back in its cradle quickly and sat there, breathing in

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short, laboring pants like a spent runner, or a man who has escaped some deadly peril by the barest fraction of an inch.

It was very quiet in the study. Not quiet with the absence of all sound, but with an unheard harmony of small noises: the ticking of the banjo clock on the wall behind him, the chirring cheep of insects in the garden, the muted sounds of traffic drifting in from the street.

He drew the writing tablet to him and picked up his pen. Like one who finds the missing key piece of a jigsaw puzzle and knows he nears solution he had found his text. He began writing in his precise Graeciform hand, word following word in quick succession.

The whisper of his pen across the page was like the little rustle of a bride's train on the church aisle, and from the garden came the faint perfume of verbena and mock orange. Somehow the scent annoyed him; made him think of a funeral. Five or six blocks away, where the cross street met the Avenue, the Salvation Army held its nightly revival, and the singing, slightly raucous, just a little off-key, filtered through the distance, punctuated by the throbbing of a bass drum and the tinkle of a tambourine:

"Behold how many thousands now are lying
Bound in the darksome prison-house of sin,
With none to tell them of the Saviour's dying,
Or of the life He died for them to win. . . ."

He tore the last sheet from the tablet, blotted it, and glanced at his wristwatch. It was his methodical habit to read his sermons aloud, timing them to an exact twenty minutes, adding to them if they fell short or making such deletions as were necessary to bring them within the limit.

"My text is from the thirty-fifth verse of the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel According to Saint Matthew," he began: "'I was a stranger and ye took me in, naked and ye clothed me. . . .'"

The long hand of his watch had reached the line dividing the fifty-eighth from the fifty-ninth minute on the dial as he began to read, and slipped across the demarcation to point to one minute of eleven as he finished his text: "'. . . I was in prison and ye came unto me.'"

Something was wrong. Terribly, horribly wrong. It was as if a dreadful cramp had seized him, not alone in limbs and stomach, but in every nerve and muscle and tendon.

A roaring like a salvo of artillery deafened him, a light so brilliant that it blinded him flashed in his eyes. Then like the after-image of the blinding light against his retina he saw her face for the fragment of an instant, white, agonized, the lovely slanting eyes suffused with tears and holding in their depths a look of mortal terror, the petulant red mouth a square to frame a scream of torment unendurable. He tried to speak, but nothing but a moan so faint it might have been a sigh, or the ghost of a tired sigh, slipped through his lips, and at the corners of his mouth a froth of tiny bubbles formed.

IT WAS a beautiful, impressive funeral. The Cathedral was filled to capacity, the clergy of the diocese in robe and surplice, but with black tippets instead of stoles, attended in a body; the Bishop conducted the services, and the choir sang "For All Thy Saints," "Ten Thousand Times Ten Thousand," and "The Strife is O'er, the Battle Done."

It was almost three o'clock when the last shiny limousine rolled back to Gadston's garage, and Julius Gadston, always careful in such matters, saw it was inspected for lost articles, checked for gas and oil, and carefully backed into its berth. "You did a fine job, Harvey," he told his chief embalmer as he passed his employee in the hall connecting with the office. "Dean Pancoast looked magnificent, superb. Have any trouble with him?"

"No, sir. I was afraid I might when I saw the coroner's certificate. It said the primary cause of death was coronary thrombosis, and the immediate cause arteriosclerosis, evidently of long duration—you know how hard such cases are sometimes—but—"

"Yes?" his employer prompted as he paused with a puzzled frown.

"I didn't find much evidence of any such

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condition of the arteries. The circulation was just about perfect, only—" Once more he halted, and there was something almost frightened in his face.

"What the devil are you driving at?" demanded Mr. Gadston testily. "What's all the mystery?"

"Well, sir, you know we had Jessamin Cawley's body here, too. The girl they called Allura. Wilson and McCullogh went out to the State Prison for her after the electrocution—"

"Yes, I remember. You prepared her, too, didn't you? Fine piece of work—"

"Yes, sir. I attended both her and Dean Pancoast. That's what's got me jumpy as a bullfrog."

"Eh?"

"Well, you know, she was electrocuted, and there were two little burned spots on her. One on the right leg just above the ankle, and the other at the base of the brain, where the head-electrode made contact. . . ."

"Of course." The older mortician nodded. "You often find such marks in cases of electrocution—"

"Just so, sir. But there were exactly the same sort o' burnt marks, and in exactly the same places, on Dean Pancoast's body."

Ghostlings

By DOROTHY QUICK

OUT of the silence of the night
Come icy fingers tipped with snow,
And a strange thin piping
That no birds know.

And there are misty figures
Ringing all the world apart;
Casting unbearable terror
Around the heart.

Gaping, senseless, horrid faces
Coming from another world;
These are the nameless ghostlings,
The dark unfurled.

These are the nameless ghostlings,
Creeping slowly as the mist,
To weave the spells of horror
No mortal can resist.

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The House on Forest Street

And those tired souls within were as old as the eerie dwelling itself

THE house had about it the unmistakable ancientness of good things grown old. It was in a district and on a street which once would have been referred to by envious townspeople as "the best," and even now, was good.

It was a well-built house—good materials and good construction—so that the passing years, though adding nothing in the way of upkeep and new paint, had not taken their toll as they might. It was a large and private house, as though built for a big family whose members got along each with one another. But now it was old, and the white picket fence that once was new and fashioned with the symmetry of a Halloween pumpkin's teeth, now here and there bulged and sagged, gray wood showing beneath the worn white paint.

The lawn, formerly soft, green, and the best croquet course in the county, had come, seemingly, to grow rocks in place of grass. Or maybe in reality these were the stones of small boys who threw them at an old building that could not retaliate. So that now a stranger to town driving by casually would think no one lived here in the place on Forest Street.

But there *were* people there. Human structures like the house—old and worn. All except Leonard Oberland. He was Youth. He was the streamlined Buick in a garage of Maxwells and Moons and Stutzes. He was the six-engined airliner among boys' kites. He was zoot and hep and savvy and schmaltz among faded lace and rustling taffeta and bustles and delicate neck pendants.

"Lord!" Leonard used to expostulate to his college chums. "They're all half dead in there! Aunt Agatha and Aunt Cornelia and Uncle Ben and Uncle Joe . . . they can tell you about Harding and Taft, and you're kidding yourself if you don't think they've heard a Fulton steamboat! But brother! *Brother,* from then on. . . !"

BUT Lenny Oberland had ideas, big ideas. For himself! He was the incongruity in the Oberland mansion. His parents had died (luckily for them) when he was a small boy, leaving him this plethora of aunts and uncles, none of whom he cared for, because caring for anyone outside of Lenny was beyond his capabilities.

"And besides, I wouldn't have cared for them anyway!" he used to tell his friends at the beer tavern.

He was an unpleasant youngster, as unpopular with the Oberland's neighbors as they were with them. Among a multitude of early sins he had committed, Lenny had fired several chicken coops, bringing about prematurely an embarrassment of Sunday roasts. He had done petty stealing where and when he could around town, always being discreet enough to pick "softies" who would let him go, or people who could not retaliate.

Lenn's entire life had the irreverence of a long, low whistle during a church service, and the elder Oberlands were completely unable in their tired, befuddled way to cope with him. Although obviously they would continue to try, the town knew, until with one ghoulish monster prank, Lenny would engulf them all.

As he grew older, Lenny's childish pranks became adult pranks. Roasting somebody's pet tabby cat alive had no point. He tried a few years at the State College nearby, left earlier than the rest of his class (by request), and came back to the house on Forest Street to live.

It was then that the idea occurred to him that he could and would be a man of some prominence, indulging himself in the de-

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BY ALLISON V. HARDING

Heading by Boris Dolgov

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lights of his heart—mainly liquor and women—but the problem, of course, was money.

Now in his early twenties, Lenny began to reason that the Oberland estate was largely non-existent except for the house and its hoarded treasures of old lace and furniture, paintings, books, silverware, and bric-a-brac. He became something of an expert on these material objects. If there was no true money to be had, these articles certainly represented money! They could be sold.

On several occasions he sneaked off to town with a piece of silverware, only to be turned down locally because the object was familiar, and no merchant would trust his word that "Aunt Agatha really doesn't want it anymore."

There were several valuable paintings in the house, and Lenny studied this subject rather meticulously, although his eye for art was always for the mercenary rather than for any intrinsic beauty.

THE full-length portrait in the study interested him. It was of an early ancestor Oberland, and time and again, he would find one of his uncles or aunts standing before it as though in reverence. He realized quickly from his cursory knowledge of such things that the painting probably was of little value. It did not compare with some rarified landscapes and other fine pieces of art elsewhere in the house. To be sure, the frame was an elaborate one, heavy and expensive.

But *their* interest in it—poor fools!—was sentimental. For himself, he'd take the damned thing out and shoot it! Probably the frame would bring a hundred bucks by itself. And he didn't like the painting. Old Man Ancestor Oberland was a fierce-looking guy, Lenny thought, standing on tiptoe to stretch his five-foot-six of height to look more fully into the steady gray eyes of his forebear.

And those absurd costumes with the ridiculous sidearms, small-sword and all! There was a Latin slogan at the side of the portrait, which translated (and God knows he'd heard his uncles mumble it enough!) went something like, "I Defend the Right."

The other paintings were more choice. Then there was old jewelry. Jewelry going to waste around the thin, scrawny arms and necks of Aunts Agatha and Cornelia, for which he, Lenny, could get money. For which, he Lenny, could have a good time! The lace—well, that's hard to find a market for, he discovered.

But the old books. He got only twenty-five dollars for the set of Shakespeare he sneaked out of the study and his Aunt Agatha cried for days after she discovered the loss. Silly old fool!

Still, however, you sliced it, Lenny thought to himself, this was a mere pittance . . . mere drops in the bucket. What he needed to pull was a grand coup! In detective stories, you read of a son . . . or nephew . . . anxiously waiting for a parent or relative to die. But Heavens! What would you do about four of them! Granted they were old and not robust, but at the same time, of a strain that keeps going forever! Tottering finally to rest, he thought to himself, sometime in their eighties or nineties!

There was no reason why, he told his Uncle Ben one day, all of you don't move into the Almford Arms (a suburban hostelry of brilliant stucco, tile-roofed, built by some Big City entrepreneur—"For Transient and Permanent Country Clientele").

"You'd all be very comfortable there. And, Uncle, we could sell this place and the grounds for a tidy sum!"

Uncle Ben had looked at him through faded old eyes that seemed to water even more than usual at the mention of selling the Oberland estate and shook his head sadly.

Lenny met the same attitude about disposing of some of the bric-a-brac around the old house.

Oh yes, here and there, he could snitch this or that, but it made for little more than pin money.

THE frustration of his predicament ate into Leonard's small soul. He took to drinking even more heavily than usual and would confide where and when he could to various bartender friends and tavern hangers-on that those "damn relatives of mine are trying to starve me out of the place! Won't give me my share of the money!"

He was driven to these grown-up-quick

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beer spots, because in the established part of the town, the Oberlands were revered and Leonard looked upon as one of those inexplicable Acts of God. The ugly duckling, utterly worthless offspring type.

At one of the taverns there was a girl. A honey-colored girl with mascarad eyelashes and long, long legs, encased in black hose. Leonard would look up at her—she was several inches taller than he—and think that with the Oberland money behind him, he could have her. There would be no other way, because he was smart enough to know intuitively that even with her tough accent and dubious antecedents, she would see no attraction in him over the big-bruiser truckdrivers and working men who came blustering into the tavern. Except that he was an Oberland and had had money—if he could get it!

Her name was Mimi. Like the old Maurice Chevalier song, he used to tell her. And she would giggle and say she wouldn't remember that and hope fervently to herself that she didn't feel too heavy when she sat on his knee.

It was the thought of Mimi with her cloud of cheap-perfumed, orange-golden hair whirling around in his drink-befuddled brain at night that drove Lenny on to even greater efforts. And it drove him one late night to the closet in the attic which had always been locked for as long as he'd remembered.

Although he couldn't recall that the issue had ever come up, he knew that he was not supposed to tamper with the door. But that meant nothing to him now. He'd looked over his Uncle Ben's shoulder once when Ben had opened the door. There was little inside as he could remember but a few shelves with some dusty red-backed volumes. No mysterious chest or trunk that might contain other old valuables and jewels.

But for the cussedness of it, this night he worked a screwdriver and chisel at the lock, and after a short while the rusty old catch finally gave.

The room was as he remembered it from that one look long ago over Uncle Ben's shoulder. Small, with the unused smell of mustiness and dryness. The shelves with the books, and little more.

HE LOOKED at the red-backed volumes casually and round they were records of dates and marriages and deeds, and so on.

There was nothing here he needed. But wait! He saw something in the opening from which he'd drawn one of the big ledgers. It was a medium-sized, very old tan box with a clasp lock. He drew it out and shook it. There was somthing heavy inside, and his pulses quickened. Perhaps . . . perhaps something of value. A stack of currency laid away here by his uncles against that proverbial rainy day! It would be just like them.

He made short work of the clasp lock with his heavy screwdriver. The lid flew up and he looked inside. It was disappointing. Just another book, its old red-colored cover peeling here and there. He could just make out the word "Diary" written across the face.

Lenny took it out and opened it. He saw quickly that it belonged to his Uncle Gerold. He remembered Gerald, older brother to Ben and Joe, but not by much. But he had been a large, stern-faced man with much more life and energy and fire than his two younger brothers—or sisters for that matter. Gerald had died when Leonard was very young. Not long after Lenny had come to live with his uncles and aunts.

He looked closer. The writing was fine and cramped but written in indelible jet-black ink. Lenny turned the pages, reading here and there, and as he read the disappointment on his face faded away.

He licked his lips once and his small hands tightened on the old diary. So he'd been sorry it wasn't a wad of currency, eh? This was better! Far better!

There was a slight sound from somewhere in the great dark house beneath him, and Leonard quickly shoved the book in his pocket. He replaced the lockup box and the ledgers in front of it, shone his flashlight once around the tiny room to see that all was in place again and left the way that he'd come.

HE PADDED down from the attic and headed for his room eagerly, wanting to read more of that precious volume in his pocket. But no. His room would not be too good. If he lit his lamp, the lumi-

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nance could be seen through his door transom by Aunt Agatha, who always slept lightly in the next room and with her door open.

He crept down the flights of stairs to the library and settled himself on a small divan with neighboring table and reading lamp. He snapped on the single bulb and sat in the gloomy, shadowed room and read avidly.

Uncle Gerald had written a factual family record here without sparing the details, setting them all down. Leonard had never suspected Uncle Ben's great trouble with drink. The distressing love affair Aunt Agatha had had with the Finlely boy. Oh, choice, choice! Leonard could hardly keep from clapping his hands together ecstatically.

This was his means to control the whole household! The four of them. Those four dignified old fogies! And there were things about every one of them here that they thought were buried in the past. And now weren't!

There was much too much to digest and cover in one night's reading. Lenny closed the little book and just sat there in the library, his eyes roaming around the room, glittering. This, or at least what it represented, would all be his soon now. He held the key in his pocket. He had a hostage that would win out against their old-fashioned reluctance and miserliness toward him.

He'd have Mimi, because he knew she was that kind of a girl. What if she did tower above him as they walked down the street. He was an Oberland and he had money, and that, he knew, was what Mimi, like himself, really wanted out of life.

THE clock in the hall struck three with heavy muted notes that were as dignified and tasteful as its owners. Leonard got up, with his hand on the single-bulb light. As he stood there, he had a thought and he turned to look at the wall beside him where the full-length portrait of the Oberland ancestor was hung.

He smiled a crooked little smile and shook his fist.

"I'll enjoy smashing you!" he intoned as though he were talking to a real person. "I'll enjoy smashing you to pieces, preferably over Uncle Ben and Joe's heads!"

The portrait was shrouded in darkness, but the light caught the upper part of the face and the eyes gleamed peculiarly. It was a strange picture. Lenny had never liked it nor the man it portrayed. The eyes looked straight at you, no matter how you moved your head. They looked into yours. Just as the man in life must have looked at you, Lenny thought.

He shook his head angrily and snapped off the light. But his concentration on the picture had been so intense that for a moment even in the darkness, he thought the eyes gleamed at him. He went back up to his room and spent considerable time searching around its untidy interior until he found a suitably obscure spot to hide his new-found treasure. He discovered that by removing a few loosely hammered tacks from the side of his box spring, he could lift the flap and insert the diary between the springs, from which vantage point once the flap was returned to its original position, it was not detectable.

The next morning at his late breakfast, when Lenny got up to leave, his Aunt Cornelia and Uncle Joe stopped him in the hall.

"You're not going down to spend your day at that awful tavern, Leonard, are you?" his aunt implored.

Uncle Joe shook his head sadly. Lenny flew into a rage. Of course the townsfolk had seen him there. And of course someone had told one of the four. But what business was it of theirs! His anger died as quickly as it had flamed and he fixed his uncle with a cunning eye.

"Well, now that's a fine thing to ask your nephew," he whined in a stage voice. "You, Uncle Joe. You've been a man of the world, I understand. You, of all people, can certainly appreciate how it is with a guy when he must have his liquor regular-like or just go daft!"

Lenny watched the color creep up from his uncle's neck and flood the whole face. Aunt Cornelia looked surprised and shocked. He walked whistling out of the house. That would give 'em something to think about! Because certainly nobody had ever mentioned anything about Uncle Joe's "weakness" to him, Lenny, directly.

He walked around the town most of the day, bowled for an hour or so, went

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to the Post Office and then stopped in at the tavern. He winked at Mimi, and when she came over, he pinched her cheek and said, "Could be that you and me are going to take a nice trip sometime soon? You'd like to go places in grand style, Mimi?"

"Would I?" she breathed and leaned close enough for him to smell the perfume of her flaming hair.

There was a letter for Agatha written in an old lady's scrawl, undoubtedly from some old crony friend, or he would have opened it to see if it had to do with dividends, for Lenny liked to keep track of such matters. He took the opportunity to take it to his aunt. He let her thank him and slit open the envelope before he said, "Aunt Agatha, I want to ask your advice about an affair of the heart. Because I know you'll understand about those things—you having been something of a passionate lover yourself!"

She let the epistle drop out of her thin, dry fingers onto the faded-flower lap. She looked up at him from where she was sitting, and the old, gray eyes were steady although the chin quivered a bit as if with a sad or distasteful memory. The way Lenny was smiling, she knew as he wanted her to know.

He nodded his head wisely. "You used to be such a one with the fellows, Aunt Agatha, or at least with one particular fellow. Mister Finley, wasn't it? I thought you could give me some advice about my Mimi!"

"Who . . . how did you . . .!" Her voice trailed off and her thin hands made themselves into fists and raised to her eyes like small knots of ancient yellow wood. The shaking of the chin transferred itself to the whole body.

That was all Leonard wanted, and he left the room, hardly waiting to be outside her door before he whistled happily through his teeth.

The meal that night was strangely quiet. Uncle Joe and Aunt Agatha said hardly a word during the repast, and their silence was caught by Ben and Cornelia. Only Lenny was talkative, and he with his magpie's chatter made up in noise for the others' silence.

That night, after the house was dark and asleep, he took the old diary out of its hiding place in the box spring, and stole downstairs.

He settled himself on the small divan in the library, lit the single-bulb lamp and started to thumb through the precious pages again.

But for some reason this night, it was hard to concentrate. A dozen times he lifted his head and listened to some small, innocent sound that, for a moment, he had first interpreted as someone creeping down the black stairs or through the hall. Again, he tried to read.

There were items here of great interest. Cornelia, he discovered with widening eyes, had failed one of her subjects her last year at finishing school and so had been unable to graduate with the rest of her contemporaries. Uncle Gerald even remarked on the catastrophic effect this had had on his young sister, but hoped her shock and humiliation would pass without leaving too great a scar.

UNCLE BEN, other paragraphs revealed, was something of a gambler and had to be restricted by Gerald playing the part of the protective older brother. On one occasion, Ben had become mixed up with what later had turned out to be a highly suspicious lottery although—Gerald took great pains to point out—Uncle Ben did not guess its dubious machinations. The lottery and those who collected money for it in good faith for a charitable cause were merely dupes in a get-rich-quick scheme of some unscrupulous promoters.

So I come by my gambling honestly, Leonard thought to himself with a smirk.

He set himself to studying the book further, but the inability to concentrate nagged at him. Finally, as though drawn by a magnet, his head swiveled and he found himself looking squarely at the dark, gloom-shrouded figure of the ancestor Oberland hanging on the wall.

The figure was ugly, certainly. He often thought it even sinister. But now it seemed menacing! The fixed stare—strange the way the little lamp highlighted those penetrating eyes—was disconcerting. Lenny put the book back in his side pocket and rose,

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walking around to the side till he stood directly before the lifesize painting.

It made him angry that he had to look up at the old devil standing there so proudly as though he had life and breath and blood in him. To Leonard came a sudden feeling of repugnance and hate beyond the dislike he'd known before for the picture. He looked at the old-fashioned shoes and hose and clothing, the sword handle protruding from its hanging scabbard. But his eyes always came back to that face and he heard himself say, "When I am master of this house, you will be banished and destroyed! I hate you!"

Then he spun on his heel, snapped the light off and walked rapidly from the study, feeling almost as though the painted eyes followed him through the darkness until he mounted the stairs beyond their range.

WITHIN a week Leonard had initiated both Uncle Ben and Aunt Cornelia into their portion of the mysteries of his new discovery. He made an oblique but identifiable reference to Uncle Ben about mismanagement of money schemes and lotteries. He forced Aunt Cornelia into a discussion of the educational system, once saying that he didn't feel too badly about having been flung out of college, that some of the best people failed in their studies.

"In fact, didn't I hear somewhere, Aunt Cornelia, that you failed to graduate from your preparatory school years ago?"

He went off to town to his pet tavern and his pet, Mimi, later feeling well satisfied with himself. And the feeling of satisfaction was so deep-rooted that it was not totally disturbed when he entered the familiar bar and saw Mimi holding hands with a granite-faced stranger Leonard had never seen before.

"That's Joseph Rock," the bartender whispered to him, pointing with a wag of his head to Mimi's companion. "New Chief Clerk in town."

Rock, thought Leonard to himself, was an appropriate name with a face like that. In fact, the whole man looked as though he'd been hewn out of the stuff his name was made of. But chief clerks, he was mindful, are useful. It would be a chief clerk, for instance, who would take charge of certain desirous changes in deeds and ownership bonds, and so forth.

Lenny cleared his throat back of Mimi's honey-colored hair. She turned her head quickly.

"Oh, Lenny!" She jumped to her feet, her long legs looking very pretty. "This is a new friend of mine, Mr. Rock. Joseph Rock, Leonard Oberland. He owns that big place up on Forest Street."

She said it as though Lenny really did, and he projected himself, liking the picture, as he put his small hand in Rock's big one.

They had some beers together and made small talk about this and that. Finally Rock got up to leave, patting Mimi's hand as he departed and nodding to Oberland.

"I like the way you said that," Len stated, his eyes still on the retreating figure of the new Chief Clerk.

"Said what, babykins?" It was a name she used in moments of poorly conceived kittenishess.

"Don't call be babykins! About me owning the estate up on Forest Street."

"Well. It's just about true, isn't it?"

"Almost, my dear. Almost," he breathed and put his small hand on her knee.

Mimi winked at the bartender who was watching with cynical amusement, and said, "You're so smart, Lenny. So very smart. And sometimes I think all the things you talk about what we're going to do and the places we're going to go when you get that property and the money are all going to come true!"

JUST how smart he was, brought itself home to Leonard when he got back to the Oberland mansion late that evening. First he noticed there were more lights than usual on the downstairs floor instead of the one bulb left on in the entry hall to await his arrival. The living room and study lights were also ablaze.

It was past their usual bedtime, but the four were up waiting for him, sitting silent and stern-faced when he came into the library in answer to Uncle Ben's call.

"Leonard! Just a moment, please!"

He faced them, for a moment awed by his own audacity, but the beer inside still kept him warm and the thoughts of Mimi and her saying, "You're so smart."

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He waited, and finally Uncle Ben cleared his old, congested throat and said deliberately, "Leonard. Your uncle, aunts, and I have been discussing you and certain statements you have made recently to each one of us."

Ben took off his nose-glasses and polished them nervously with a large white handkerchief. His uncle's statement called for no answer and Leonard stood silently in the center of the room waiting for what else was to come. Ben clamped the glasses back on his thin nose.

"We have, I shall admit, compared notes!" —Lenny noticed now that both his aunts had been crying—". . . and we find that you have dug far into the past of each one of us. Now . . ." His uncle raised a palm upward stopping Len who had opened his mouth to speak. ". . . Now we know full well that nobody in this household has ever mentioned to you any of the four matters you have uncovered, and there could be no other way—excepting Gerald's diary! Leonard, we want it back!"

So they'd gone up to the attic, had they! Gone into the locked closet and found the empty diary box! As Leonard stood there, his feeling of strength and power grew. He now held the cards, the trumps. Some of his smug satisfaction must have been shown on his face, for Uncle Joe put in:

"Yes, Leonard, we must have Gerald's diary back! It does not belong to you but to the family and to the house!"

THE fools, Leonard thought to himself, and I am smart, so smart! Mimi's phrase floated through his brain, helped along by waves of beer. He would neither argue with them nor placate them. He would not deny that he had the book. He would not say that he did have it, and as he looked at the semi-circle of his relatives, the sneer on his face grew. There was no need any more to hide it. He was master of this house!

And with that thought exploding in him, he wanted to laugh, wanted to laugh so much that finally he did, and it burst distortedly into that ancient, dignified old room with its ancient, shocked people sitting around staring at him as though he were some demon from another world.

"You fools! You fools!" he finally articulated out of laughter. "You poor, stupid idiotic old fools!"

And then he stomped out of the room and up the stairs to his own chamber, shutting the door carefully after noticing no one had followed him, and checking on the hiding place of the precious diary. Although he knew it would be quite the opposite of the ethics of the four to search his room, they were stupid enough to ask him for the diary and expect him to return it. Even so, he reflected, it might be a good thing to find another hiding place for the red-covered volume. For it was his life now and his liberty. His magic wand, his Aladdin's lamp!

It pleased Leonard to prolong the suspense. This was an epic, dramatic moment for him, and his two uncles and two aunts acted their supporting parts perfectly. They waited with the dogged determination of the old, and every once in a while, one of them would say to him reproachfully, "Leonard, you *must* give us back Gerald's diary!"

Never anything stronger than that, mind you! No threats. Nothing. For this had changed their whole thinking, their very routine of life!

Night after night when he returned from town and an evening at the tavern and with Mimi, he found them sitting. Four old, bemused, harassed people, in the study with heads in hands, voices summoning him before them. And then having no greater strength or persuasion than just the tired, righteous, "Leonard you *must* give us back Gerald's diary!"

It amused him, because of course now he had won. It remained only to take the final simple steps and consummate the whole deal.

HE HAD pictured in mind's eye the way it would go. The family would summon aged Mr. Buckley, their lawyer. He was a dottering old fool, looking much like the walrus in "Alice in Wonderland," but thoroughly without the walrus' gift of speech. And Leonard would have Chief Clerk of the Town, Joe Rock. He'd been building a last bulwark. He'd already hinted of the affair to Rock, hinted at how the family had "done" him out of what

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was rightly his; *i. e.*, the entire estate, although this was, in no way, remotely true, and anyone who'd been longer in town than Rock would know it.

He also intimated to Rock and anyone else he ran across in those final days of his strategy, the proposition that sometimes at the old house, he feared for his welfare. Even his life!

And this was an idea more readily accepted by even the veteran townspeople, for Leonard was certainly known as a bad one and it should be a temptation for the nice Oberlands to get rid of him one way or another.

"I really think they'd do it if they knew how they could put me out of the way," Leonard used to stage his act to Joe Rock and Mimi at the tavern and then shake his head woefully. "Imagine! And me their only nephew!"

Of his four Oberland relatives, Leonard could talk most easily to Aunt Agatha. Not that it was easy, but it was less difficult, for through his life of escapades and misbehavior, she had seemed, he sensed, less disapproving. Or did it merely appear this way? He had never been quite sure. But now he used Aunt Agatha as the sounding board. She was the intermediary, the go-between.

He let it be known frankly that he wanted the deed of the house signed over to him and a fair share of the material goods therein too. He was of legal age. He felt that as they were all getting old, he should step in and act as manager for the estate.

Who knows? It might be to the family's advantage to sell the old place and the Forest Street property. Come now, they would not find it so bad living at that stucco apartment building in the village!

Then he would add fatuously that he felt so strongly about this that he would have to help make them make up their minds, and he hinted more than broadly at matters that he now knew of. Uncle Joe's drinking, Aunt Cornelia's girlhood failures, Uncle Ben's money mixups. "And you, Aunt Agatha! That, shall we say, affair of yours with the Finley man!"

"Well, anyway," he would hurry on in his sales talk to his old aunt. "You don't want these things to become known, I am sure!" And when he left, Aunt Agatha was always in tears. The silent, broken, shaken sobs of the old.

IT OCCURRED to Leonard but once that possibly they might call him on the thing and say, "Look here! You've dug up some stories about us from a family diary. It's unfortunate and it's unfair, but without attempting to deny these things are untrue, let's see you go ahead and spread them about town. We won't like it. We won't like it at all. But what does it really matter? A few curious stares at us in the street by the townspeople or perhaps a giggle and a remark here and there. That's a small price for us to pay to hold onto this house; for signing it over to you would be the same as losing it!"

But Leonard knew that the family was too old to stand up against him on this. To these four with their old-fashioned bringing-up, honor and reputation had a higher value than these considerations seemed to today. To them, he knew full well, that the most awful thing in the world would be not poverty or death or any other worldly horror or discomfiture. But the public revelation of these one-time slight and really innocent misadventures would be more than they could stand.

That he was right without question about this came home to Leonard with an impact that even shocked his callow soul. When he came home and saw the doctor's car in front of the house. He entered just as the physician was coming down the stairs. Old Dr. Towles, with the two uncles in tow.

They stood for a moment in the hall just inside the front door and talked as though Leonard were not standing there. He grasped from their conversation what had happened, and with the shock of the situation, there was triumph inside his small soul.

Finally his Uncle Ben, still talking to the doctor, fixed Leonard with a sad, penetrating stare.

"Poor Agatha really hadn't been well for days. She'd been terribly unhappy, worried."

The doctor nodded his head sadly. Leonard climbed the stairs to his room without a word. As he went inside the chamber, he saw Cornelia broken and sobbing, sitting

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beside what had once been Aunt Agatha on the bed in the adjoining room.

IN THE next few days Leonard stayed his campaign briefly. He was even docile, but he knew it was now his most splendid opportunity. All his uncle's mouthings about poor Agatha dying of shame and a broken heart stirred him not.

Leonard picked a meal only a week later to announce to his relatives that he meant to have the house. He added, because his was the kind of mind to which almost everything occurred, that it was known in town that there was little love lost between himself and the three—especially since Agatha's death, which they were trying to blame him for, as though he could be responsible for the demise of every frustrated old buzzard!

But he wanted to have it known that there were well-wishers and friends of his who'd know just what the score was if anything happened to him, so he'd better stay very, very healthy! His Aunt Cornelia answered this sadly.

"We have no violence in our hearts, Leonard. You have disappointed us, but there is a greater judgment than ours!"

He'd sneered his typical sneer in reply. Later, he cornered Uncle Ben in the study.

"I'm afraid I must become very insistent, Uncle," Leonard pushed. "I want you to sign the house over to me and give me a generous share of what we have around here for my own!"

Uncle Ben pursed his lips and made no answer.

"You know," Leonard said loudly, and his voice seemed to reverberate around the shadowed walls, "I'm buddies with Mr. Cobbs. You know, he prints the *Town Courier*. Cobbs is a man with big-city ideas even in this small dump! He'd just love to get some of these stories, and we'll start off with the one about dear Aunt Agatha and her carryings-on with Finley! She won't mind, being dead."

Ben winced.

"I mean it, Uncle!"

"All right," Uncle Ben finally said, raising gnarled hands to his head as though he could stand no more. "I'll get Lawyer Buckley and we'll do what you want."

LEONARD went whistling off to town, stopping as he'd planned these many months at the car agency near the station. He'd already been eyeing the yellow convertible job, but out of his own money, after his gambling debts and drinking and carousing expenses were paid off, there was little left.

He'd spoken to the salesman many times, and when he opened the chrome-handled door, that worthy greeted him.

"Hello, Mr. Overland!"

Lenny indicated the flashy auto as his choice.

"I'd like to take her out for the day. Try her."

He hadn't wanted to before. It would have been too much of a hardship to take the car back, too much of a temptation to keep it. And then he hadn't had the money or the sure prospects. Car-stealing was a little deeper in than he cared to get.

The salesman rubbed his hands together.

"She's yours, Mr. Oberland! Just let me have the mechanic slip some dealer's plates on her."

They both laughed.

"You think—of course if she's satisfactory in every way—you think you'll be buying her?"

Leonard nodded his head and stood admiring the shiny nickel and yellow paint. This would be some surprise for Mimi. He struggled hard to hide his impatience as they backed the car out of the showroom.

He slipped behind the wheel, hardly heard the auto man's last-minute sales talk, and drove away toward the tavern.

He parked out of sight around the corner and sauntered in. Mimi was over in the corner talking to Joe Rock. Well, Rock didn't have a brand-new car or a house and property worth plenty! He went over to them.

"Lenny!" Mimi seemed glad to see him. She'd better be!

He nodded but spoke first to Rock.

"Say, we're going to have a little transaction. This evening, I think. Can I count on you to be up at the place?"

Rock showed some interest.

"The house and property are going to be made over to me."

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Mimi squealed with delight and the Chief Town Clerk raised his eyebrows.

"Sure!" he said and grinned wolfishly. "I'll be there. Got to have everything nice and legal, eh?"

As Mimi went off to get some celebration whiskey, Rock leaned forward.

"I like a man who makes his own opportunities and then grabs 'em."

Lenny toyed with the idea of telling the fellow to see less of Mimi, but decided against it. Chief Town Clerks could be very useful in many ways, including the disposal of property and worldly goods.

FINALLY Rock left and Leonard made Mimi come out to the car with him. She was ecstatic as he knew she would be. He agreed to pick her up later when the evening came, his triumphant evening.

It was late afternoon when he drove up Forest Street. He parked ostentatiously outside the house and swaggered in. He hoped one of his relatives would see him from the window, but they were an incurious trio.

Inside the front door he slowed his step. He heard a voice from the study and he stole toward the sound. It was his Uncle Ben. Leonard eased himself to the side of the door and looked through the crack between portal and molding.

Ben was standing in front of the ancestral painting and he was talking. Why, the old coot was having a regular conversation! Once or twice his uncle raised his hands up in a gesture of imploration. Leonard heard his name mentioned and other details of the last few weeks. He stepped into the room then, angry, he knew not why.

"You old fool!" he yelled. Usually, politics had dictated at least a superficially tolerant attitude toward his uncles and aunt, but now he had no use for sham.

Uncle Ben whirled toward him with surprising speed for one of his age.

"What do you think you're doing, mumbling down here to that picture!"

"He judges us all, Leonard," Uncle Ben said with a strange smile on his face.

He stepped to the picture and traced the legend on the coat of arms, saying aloud, "I defend the right."

"You must watch out, my nephew!"

For a moment it was a temptation to strike old Ben, but the other man merely stood his ground and looked levelly back. Instead, Leonard vented his rage on the life-size portrait. He turned his head and spat at the painting and had the satisfaction of seeing his spittal run down over the sacred image.

As he started out of the room, he shrilled back, "I'm having the Town Clerk up tonight at nine! I hope you'll have that damn fool of a lawyer of yours!"

"Lawyer Buckley will be here this evening," Uncle Ben replied.

Leonard took the stairs two at a time and gamboled down the long hall that led to his end room. Off somewhere from the depths of the house he could hear his Aunt Cornelia playing the spinnet.

The damn fools! he thought to himself. But they were through now! They're finished! I'll have 'em out of here in a few days!

HE EXAMINED the hiding place of the diary again, although by now that volume had served its usefulness. He debated whether or not to burn it but decided against that.

At supper Uncle Ben cleared his throat.

"Leonard, your uncle, aunt, and I somehow don't feel you know what you're doing. We think that when you take this house over, which you've been enabled to do because of your willingness to drag the family name in disgrace and scandal, you intend to sell it and the property. Now, we would be happy to know that you were going to remain as owner and tenant. That's something entirely different. . . ."

"I'll do as I damn please!" Leonard interjected.

Cornelia wrung her hands and murmured a prayer ceilingward.

"Aren't you afraid?" It was his other uncle who directed the question.

Leonard tried to stare Joe down and failed.

"Afraid! Afraid of you old fossils! Or do you think I'm scared of that painting in there!" His lips curled in scorn.

"There are forces to be afraid of," Uncle Ben said firmly. "Right *is* mightier than wrong."

"I defend the right!" parroted Leonard. "Oh, you poor old fools!"

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He got up from the table, cutting short what he knew would be the last meal he would have to have with them.

On a sudden impulse, he went into the study and looked at the ancestral Oberland.

"Probably a phony, too!" he murmured.

He noticed that his uncle had carefully wiped off the mark of his insult. Leonard suddenly grabbed for the painting. He lifted it off its wire hook, and staggering a little under the weight of it, carried it upstairs. Tomorrow he'd burn the portrait and dispose of the frame.

He put it in the back of his closet and then noted by his wristwatch he just had time to get down to the tavern to pick up Mimi. As he ran down the walk, he saw old Buckley's out-of-date sedan drawing up in the twilight.

Even the "Hello, babykins," was sufferable this night. Mimi gave him a moist, fragrant kiss and they drove back up the hill toward Forest Street.

"This won't take long, Mimi. You wait outside here in the car for me, and after everything's all fixed, we'll drive somewhere and do a little celebrating, eh?"

She said she'd wait, kissed him again, and murmured, "I think you're *so* clever!"

HE went hurriedly inside and found them already gathered in the study. Lawyer Buckley looked very grave and perturbed, his three relatives resigned. The only cheerful face was that of Chief Town Clerk Joe Rock. Rock nodded at Leonard.

Ben rose immediately as Lenny entered the room. "Where is he!" He gestured at the empty wall where the ancestral Oberland had hung.

"Never mind that now!" said Lenny, waving his hand.

"But you've got—!"

Lawyer Buckley put in a word. "Let's let that go for now, Benjamin, and get on with the business matter at hand. I've tried to dissuade you from this completely insane act, but for a reason, or reasons, best known to yourself, I understand you three have decided to deed over to your nephew, Leonard Oberland, this house and a major portion of its material goods."

The three nodded almost in unison. But they seemed far more concerned with the empty space on the wall. It amused Leonard to see how their eyes kept turning that way.

Lawyer Buckley spoke: "There's one point that I would like to make. A condition of this deal. It seems, I am told, that a certain family diary has disappeared from its usual place in the archives of this house." He addressed himself to Lenny. "Your Uncles Benjamin and Joseph and Aunt Cornelia would like the return of that diary before the papers are signed."

Bluster grew up in Leonard but subsided quickly. What the hell, he thought. He was going to burn it.

"Agreed," he said.

"And now the diary!" Buckley persisted.

"All right. All right!"

Leonard left the study and walked upstairs. Sweet moments, these, he thought reflectively as he passed down the long, dark passageway that led to his room, and he thought of Mimi waiting outside for him in the car.

When he came to the end of the hall, he went in, lit the small bedlamp and bent over at the foot of the four-poster. His fingers started to work on the tacks that held the ticking in place. They came away easily and he lifted the loose flap, inserting an arm, groping with his fingers.

His hand had closed around the old volume that had been the key to his overwhelming victory when he heard the sound and remained fixed for a moment in that position. It was . . . yes, the door of his closet slowly opening with its familiar squeak.

Leonard, not a particularly courageous soul, was afraid to look. He knew he'd left the others behind him downstairs. None of them would have had the chance to get up here. But could the family have been smart enough to think up a way to retaliate? Had they planted someone up here—like the fictional private detective stuff—to watch him and take the diary, perhaps not realizing he'd be willing to give them the now-worthless volume?

IT WAS the sound of the step, soft and stealthy, as much as his reasoning, that made Lenny turn his prickling head. And then he screamed!

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They said the first scream was more horrible than the second. It was the desperate, horrifying screech of an animal, insane with fear within a split second. It was loud in their ears downstairs, and even Mimi, waiting outside in the yellow convertible, heard it.

The second scream was different, but in its way, as awful. A gurgling, tearing, spouting sound, punctuated suddenly as though a rubber stopper had been inserted abruptly.

They raced upstairs and found Leonard lying with the old diary in his hand, lying by the bed, with most of the blood of his small man-body in still-moving pools and rivulets around him.

And through his throat completely and coming out the other side was an ancient, swordlike weapon with hammered silver guard and hilt, which caused the police the greatest amount of puzzlement.

His three relatives, Lawyer Buckley, and Chief Clerk Rock had rushed upstairs at Leonard's screams. There was no one else in the room beside the dead man. A careful search of the house revealed nothing. Even the room windows were locked from the inside.

It was completely inexplicable. Experts said that the death weapon was "an ancient small-sword, an object from another century, a light, tapering weapon for thrusting, used chiefly in dueling and fencing." The instrument rightly belonged in a museum rather than in a police-exhibits list.

Finally the old Oberland house returned to a semblance of normalcy. Leonard's room was cleaned and closed forever, but not before the uncles, Ben and Joe, had discovered the portrait of the Oberland ancestor tucked safely away in their late nephew's closet.

They hung it with tender care back in the study where it had always been and where it belonged, and after they had switched it this way and that as picture-hangers do to satisfy themselves, they both stopped for a moment as though caught with the same, sudden thought.

Then they turned to look at one another and they nodded, as though saying, "Of course! And why not? We should have thought of it and known it before!"

For it was plain to anyone who knew the picture and remembered it well as they did, that there was a certain something missing. An object of ornamentation, a subtle change.

Though the scabbard hung as it had before on the fine old figure, it was now empty. For the protruding sword hilt with the hammered-silver guard was gone. . . .

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by Lee Brown Coye

A WITCH OR WIZARD MEANS A WISE MAN OR A WISE WOMAN. JUDGING BY THE EXISTING ACCOUNTS, THIS RECOGNITION WAS GIVEN WITH REASON. IN SPITE OF THEIR VULGAR DOINGS, THE KNOWLEDGE THEY DISPLAYED IS INCREDIBLE. THE SCOPE OF THEIR LEARNING REACHED FAR INTO THE UNKNOWN & THEIR POWERS OF INSIGHT WERE REMARKABLE. HAD IT NOT BEEN FOR THEIR ALLIANCE WITH THE DEVIL, WORKS OF EVERLASTING VALUE WOULD HAVE BEEN ACHIEVED BUT THE EVIL THEY PERSONIFIED THRUST THEM INTO WAYS OF DISHONOR. A WIZARD WAS AN UGLY CADAVEROUS OLD MAN. FROM WHENCE THEY SPRANG NO ONE KNOWS. THEY WERE OMNIPRESENT & ALWAYS WITH THEM WERE THEIR IMPS.

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The Ponderer

BY ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

THE GREAT, tree-topped cliff towered hugely in the sunlight and cast its broad, deep shadow across the flat strip of land which lay between it and the jungle. At the center of the cliff, running its full height from base to crest,

What is the greatest question of the ages? For only that would save him from the Ponderer

Heading by Lee Brown Coye

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jutted an immense outcrop of solid gray rock fantastically molded into semblance of a ruminating giant. Though craggy and rugged, old and worn, so startingly did it look like a gargantuan statue of someone dreaming of ages long forgotten that ever since the days of the vanished Chiapans it had been named The Ponderer—and mightily feared.

Overhead, the coppery sky of Ciapas poured heat into the rocks, the flat strip and the jungle. To the south lay Palenque with its creeper-covered ruins of a civilization absorbed into the mists of antiquity. There too, in Palenque, was the nearest *finca* where a humble peon could slake his thirst and at the same time rid himself of the eerie feeling induced by this eternally brooding colossus.

CLUMSILY turning his mule at the end of the strip and edging his primitive stick-plow around behind it, Jose Felipe Eguerola paused to mop his lean, nutbrown face, lick his cracked lips and wave away a horde of mosquitoes. Deep within the jungle to one side of him unseen things yapped and squealed and howled derisively. To his other side soared the cliff and its part-embedded monster of stone. The shadow of The Ponderer's tremendous head slanted far across the lines of new, thin furrows, so high in the sky was it poised.

Jose Felipe Eguerola scrupulously avoided looking directly at the dour shape of The Ponderer. He never gave it eye for eye, never. To do so would be bad. He'd not the remotest notion of why it might be bad, but he was taking no chances. Already he was taking chances enough, in the opinions of some.

Fra Benedictus, with his holy water and a few crazy Yanquis with cameras had been the only ones to practice the precept that a cat may look at a king. Nothing terrible had happened to any of them as far as he knew. But he, Jose Felipe Eguerola, had never owned a pair of rawhide sandals, never fascinated a plump senorita, never gained a peso in the State lottery. All that he possessed were a grass hut pleasingly adjacent to the *finca,* seven acres of perilous dirt, the stick-plow, the mule, one pair of torn pants, the sputum of the gods and the will to live despite it. His chief aim in life was to keep what little he'd got.

So for the twentieth time that day he shifted his quid of raw latex from one cheek to the other, turned the end of a furrow, beat off the mosquitoes, glanced hastily and leerily at The Ponderer from out the corners of his black and liquid eyes. In spite of the intense heat the usual shiver raced up his spine. So big, so grandly contemplative, so imperially indifferent to the scrabblings of lesser things around its mountainous feet!

Tilting his hand-woven straw sombrero the better to shield his eyes, Jose Felipe whacked the tough, drab buttocks in front of him and set up an urgent call of, *"Mula, Mula, Mula, Echa, mula!"* Obediently the animal lurched forward. Leaning his weight on the plow he followed bare-footed, splay-toed.

High above, The Ponderer meditated in utter disregard of the tiny, buglike figures, two and four-footed, as they crawled dustily toward the shadow he was casting. He had posed there so long and eroded so much that none could tell for certain whether he had been carved by oldtime hands of wondrous cunning, or whether he was no more than a freakish product of the elements.

IN AWFUL truth, he was neither. The few who had viewed him and theorized about him had erred by rejecting the self-evident in favor of the obscure. He was precisely what he appeared to be, namely, The Ponderer. In that respect if in no other, the wary Jose Felipe's sixth sense was more reliable than the erudition of his betters.

Hesitantly, man and beast toiled through the potent shadow, emerged into the light. Jose Felipe coughed with dust and relief. Invariably he was relieved to escape that darker patch. At any other time, in any other place, he had the true peon's love of the shade; it provided a break from the burning sun, something in which to laze luxuriously, something in which to lie flat on one's back with one's half-naked legs stretched right out. One could then listen idly to the wit of the fat, inactive Senor Don Antonio Miguel Gautisolo-y-Lazares who could both read and write. "Let the Yanquis work—they are more advanced."

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THE PORCELAIN MAGICIAN

by Frank Owen

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But not here. Not in that particular shadow. Not in that low-slung silhouette of a countenance which kept away Indians and peons alike, preserving the plot from all but the supremely courageous such as he, Jose Felipe Eguerola. Frequently he regretted that his courage was so supreme. Back in Palenque he was much admired for his hardihood and there had been some talk of it even in far-off Villahermosa. It was gratifying to be admired providing that one was gratified in Palenque, preferably in the *finca*. On this shadow-haunted plot he was called upon to pay the devil for the praise—and the price got upped a bit every day. There were no admirers upon the scene of action; there was only himself and the mule and the monstrous monolith to whose feet even the hungry jungle had dared not push.

Reaching the farther end, he turned mule and plow again, mopped, whoosed the mosquitoes, retilted the sombrero, cautiously eyed the cliff. *"Ho, mula. Mula. Echa, mula!"* The cry wailed and hooted along the rocky ramparts, bounding and rebounding from crevices and corners. *"Mula . . . Echa, mula!"* Parrots screamed in the impenetrable thickness of the green hell, a distant branch snapped and something thrased heavily amid the growths. *"Echa, mula!"*

The Ponderer awoke.

With slow, titanic deliberation awful to watch, The Ponderer shifted the columnar arm which had propped his head, and removed his massive elbow from his hillock of a knee. His entire tremendous torso edged the merest fraction with this his first movement; the ramparts shuddered along their length and two thousand tons of rock roared down from the cliff's face a mile away. It's sound was like the simultaneous sundering of earth and sky. The jungle yelled its own dumbfoundment with a multitude of hidden voices.

The mule had stopped in its tracks, ears twitching uneasily. Jose Felipe stood paralyzed behind it, not looking up, but down—down to the furrows where the shadow of the elbow had left the shadow of the knee and still was moving. The handles of the plow were wet in his failing grip. Sluggishly, unwillingly, he turned.

His heart at once became a river eel striving to snap at the hawk-moth fluttering within his stomach. Tiny streams of sweat crept down the bridge of his nose, the backs of his ears, the insides of his knees. The muscles of his jaws, thighs and abdomen felt strangely weak. His head was dizzy as if he had stooped too long beneath the merciless sun. He could not move, not one muscle, not one inch. He remained there glued to the earth, as fixed for all time as had seemed the thing he was watching.

Gradually, laboriously, with many harsh sounds as of stone grinding upon stone, The Ponderer came unstuck from the cliff. An avalanche of rock, pebbles and dirt cascaded on either side of him, its dust clouding his feet. Great boulders hopped and hurdled

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across the flat, some missing the transfixed onlooker by mere yards. With groaning joints The Ponderer straightened, became rigidly erect, at which point his shadow reached the jungle and hushed its agitated crying. The brazen sky glared down while even the birds were silent. The world was awed.

The Ponderer sighed. It was a sibilant sound like that of a verturesome wind lost amid unfamiliar mountains. Then without warning, and with many rasping noises, he bent and grabbed the mule. Its plow-cords broke as he snatched it three hundred feet into the air. Holding it upside-down, its legs kicking furiously, he studied it with mild interest and a touch of contempt. Just as decisively he put it back on the ground, where it lay on its side and panted heavily, tongue out, eyes rolling. Still Jose Felipe remained helplessly rooted to the fateful spot.

As the great hand came for him, Jose called pitifully upon his legs, and called in vain. They refused to respond. The hand closed about him, huge and harsh and hard, a rocky enormity. Opening his mouth, he shrieked on a note so high in pitch that his own ears could not hear it. At terrifying speed he went upward within the hand, his mouth still wide open and emitting the sound which was not a sound.

Nightmarishly he swung close to that immense face, that craggy, lined, corroded travesty of a face. It stared at him, examining him with two granite bulges sculpturally suggestive of eyes and somehow he knew that it could really see—or exercise some queer sense equivalent to sight.

"Santa Maria!" Jose Felipe's dangling legs jerked spasmodically.

"Be still!" The Ponderer had no visible mouth, no more than a deeply carved indication of lips, yet he spoke as clearly and surely as the talking Memnon had spoken, and the other could understand his words.

"Be still, little thing who mocks my own shape and form." He turned his captive around, the better to inspect him. His grip was crushing. Jose Felipe screamed again with the sheer agony of it. The fingers loosened slightly.

"So," decided The Ponderer, "this crea-

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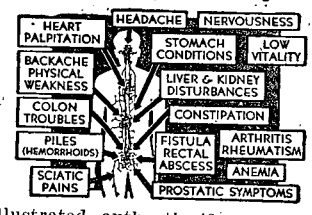

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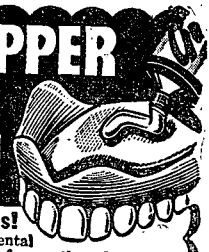

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ture has mastery of the other one. This one *thinks*. Well, well!" He chuckled in amused surprise. "You really do think, little one—that is something indeed! I, too, think. What else can one do that is worthwhile? What greater ecstasy can there be than that of sustained and involved thought?

"Maria!" repeated Jose Felipe fervently. His eyes were turned away from that great face and gazing in dread at the drop beneath the hand. From his altitude the mule resembled a mouse. The sight brought on vertigo. He tried to keep well within the cup of the hand, clinging to the fingers. His tattered, sweat-soaked pants had molded themselves to his legs.

"Only in thought may one avoid the torment of endless years," The Ponderer went on. "The long thought, the complicated thought—that is the fundamental pleasure." He crooked a finger which rasped as it bent, used it to nudge his victim. "Isn't it?"

"No!" shouted Jose Felipe hardly knowing what he was hearing or saying. *"Si! Si!"* He strove to keep his eyes away from both the fall and the face.

"Alas, I have arrived at the end of a beautiful problem," The Ponderer continued morbidly. "The problem of nine bodies circling a binary, the sixth being retrograde. It has kept me petrified with the pleasure of thought for seventy thousand years." He paused a moment, added, "Or was it seven thousand? I don't know. It is of no consequence and not worth investigating—the solution is too swift and easy." He juggled his huge hand. "But I would guess, little one, that even so simple a puzzle would be too much for your kind, eh?"

THE jiggling jerked his tongue free, and Jose Felipe promptly used it to shout, "Put me down! Put me down and I will leave your feet in peace! I swear it by—".

"Be silent!" The hand wobbled again. "Now I am sorely in need of another thought. I yearn to be numbed by a new problem. How unhappy is the silicoid without a problem!" His tremendous thumb caught the victim on the point of sliding helplessly into space, poked him back into the palm. "You, little thing, have a frag-

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mentary life which does not extend from one of my gravitic pulses to the next, and probably any puzzle you could concoct would be equally as short and futile. Yet I need a long one, I need one enjoyable for eons."

"By my father and my mother, I shall never again tread upon your shade or come within sight of here if but—"

"Quiet! Let me consider how I might convert you into a suitable problem." The rocky head came a little closer, staring, staring blindly. "Suppose that I squeeze you? Ah, yes, you will die! Sooner or later others of your kind will come seeking you. I shall squeeze them also. The mystery will grow with the mound of corpses. The tales of it will spread like ripples when a stone has been cast into a pond. Eventually other little things with minds superior to yours will come here to investigate the matter. If I persist, if I go far enough, someone will solve the mystery and employ whatever is available to shatter me to dust."

"I do not wish to die," yelled Jose Felipe. "I do not deserve to die." The jungle came back to life and its parrots screamed in sympathy.

"Now possibly *there* is a problem," mused The Ponderer completely ignoring his captive's protests. "Somewhat on the short side, but spiced with danger. Can I cast the stone and accurately estimate the speed, distance and amplitude of those ripples? Can I start the chain of circumstance, petrify myself in thought, and awake in good time with the solution of how to avoid my own destruction?" His chuckle sounded again. "This is something decidedly novel; a puzzle loaded with death, my own death. It entices me, yes, it entices me." His fingers began to curl and close in.

"Have pity!" gasped the victim, barely finding breath under the awful compression.

The fingers relaxed. "Pity? What a weird concept! Has it an inherent problem?" The Ponderer was silent awhile. "No, I cannot conceive one." More silence, then, "However, I understand what you mean. If I grant you some of this pity it may complicate matters pleasingly. I will therefore grant it by playing a little game with you."

"Put me down. Let me go."

"Not yet. Not just yet—if at all! The

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game first." The granite eyes were fixed upon him, but blank, blank. "This is the game: I shall release you unhurt if your wits prove the equal of mine. If you can petrify me you will have earned your freedom. So think, little one, *think*. It is you versus a silicoid!"

"Petrify you?" Jose Felipe's mind refused to make sense of the words. His fear was still a potent thing, but anger was outgrowing it.

"With a problem. And not some petty puzzle which can be solved within the space of a gravitic pulse, but one worthy of my time, a long, long, time." He tilted the hand slightly. "Come on, petrify me with thought—that you may live!"

JOSE FELIPE clung desperately to a rocky finger, slid, hung on, slid a bit more. He fought to discipline his scattered wits. He was no intellectual and none knew it better than he. Perhaps of bravery supreme—in given circumstances—but far, far from a genius. Offhand, he could remember nobody who'd ever given him credit for an original thought. Even the mild and inoffensive Fra Benedictus had once pronounced him too stupid to live. Evidently the worthy father had been only too right—for his end was near.

Fra Benedictus!

Had called him stupid!

Why?

Fra—

"Be swift!" The hand slanted alarmingly. "Only the witless are slow!"

Sliding to the verge, Jose Felipe struggled madly to keep his grip while his legs swung in mid-air. Below, the mouse! He could see it in his mind's eye, miles and miles down, a crushed form besides it—the bait, the first link in the hellish chain of circumstance. He tore his nails in frantic effort to stay put.

"Quick!"

More tilt.

A sudden surge of appalling fury filled his being, overwhelming his fear, lending him the strength of desperation. Arcing his body he swung himself onto a great finger, stood upon it erect, at full height, one hand braced against the other's tilted palm. His black, volatile eyes blazing with anger, he

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shook an absurd little fist at the enormous face, for the first time defying it eye to eye. His voice was shrill, vibrant with emotion as he challenged The Ponderer.

"To whom did God say, 'Let there be light!'?"

"Eh?"

Without caring whether it were true or false, the monster accepted the premise for the sake of where it led. His great hand levelled slowly, trembled, began to sink. It went down, gradually down, shivering queerly as it moved. Jose Felipe fell off it when within six feet of earth, landed heavily on his knees, got up and raced twenty paces before he fainted. Dimly and faraway in the instant before his sense left him he heard a grinding, rasping voice high up in the sky.

"To whom?"

The vault of Chiapas was still brazen and hot when his senses returned and he staggered to his feet. Likewise upright and apparently unharmed, the mule was nearby surveying him dolefully. He leaned against the animal, absorbing the comfort of its presence. He tried not to look over its back, but his eyes were drawn as if by a magnet and insisted on seeing. The panorama appeared normal. The mighty ramparts frowned down just as always they had done, and the queer, fantastic outcrop was solidly a part of them as always it had been. The outcrop bore strange resemblance to a brooding giant, a colossus plunged in eternal thought.

Looking longer and with less reluctance, Jose Felipe berated himself. Obviously the supreme courage which was spoken of even in Villahermosa was but the courage of drunken dreams. He sat too often and too long in the *finca,* too stupid to know whether the *tequila* was good or bad—almost too stupid to live. What little there was of his brains had been pickled in a potent jug so that next day he fell even behind the plow and battled the mountains in his stupor.

Moodily he felt for the plow-cords, found them broken. His eyes sought the torn ends. They popped, roamed around, perceived the great fall a mile to the north, the boulders scattered over the flat, the new rubble at

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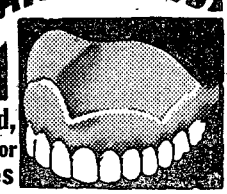

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either side of the outcrop. His sombrero lay at the outcrop's base. Even as he looked a loosened crag beyond the distant fall gave way and dropped thunderously into a ravine. Its noise echoed and re-echoed, reaching him like a great, booming voice.

"To whom? To *whom?*"

"Madre de Dios!" Madly scrambling onto the mule's back and urging its head round to face the Palenque trail, Jose Felipe Eguerola sweated and forgot the mosquitoes while he hammered his mount with his heels until it broke into a steady jog-trot. *"Mula, Mula. Echa, mula!"*

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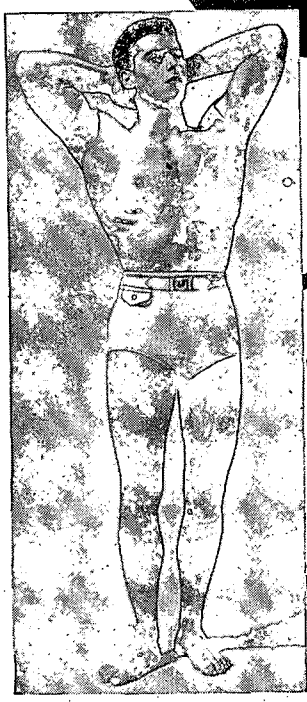

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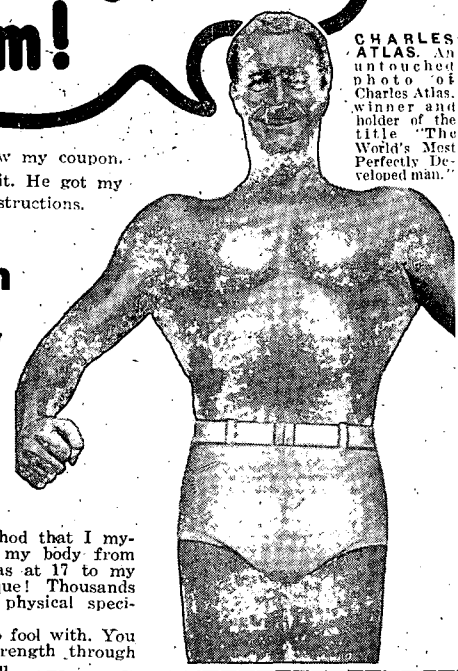

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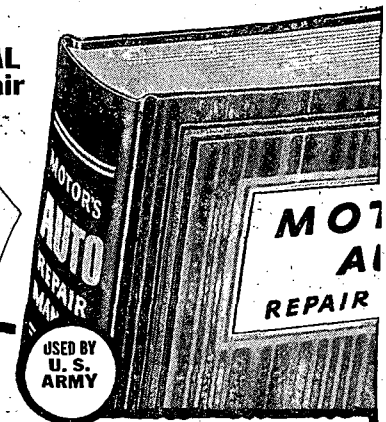

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